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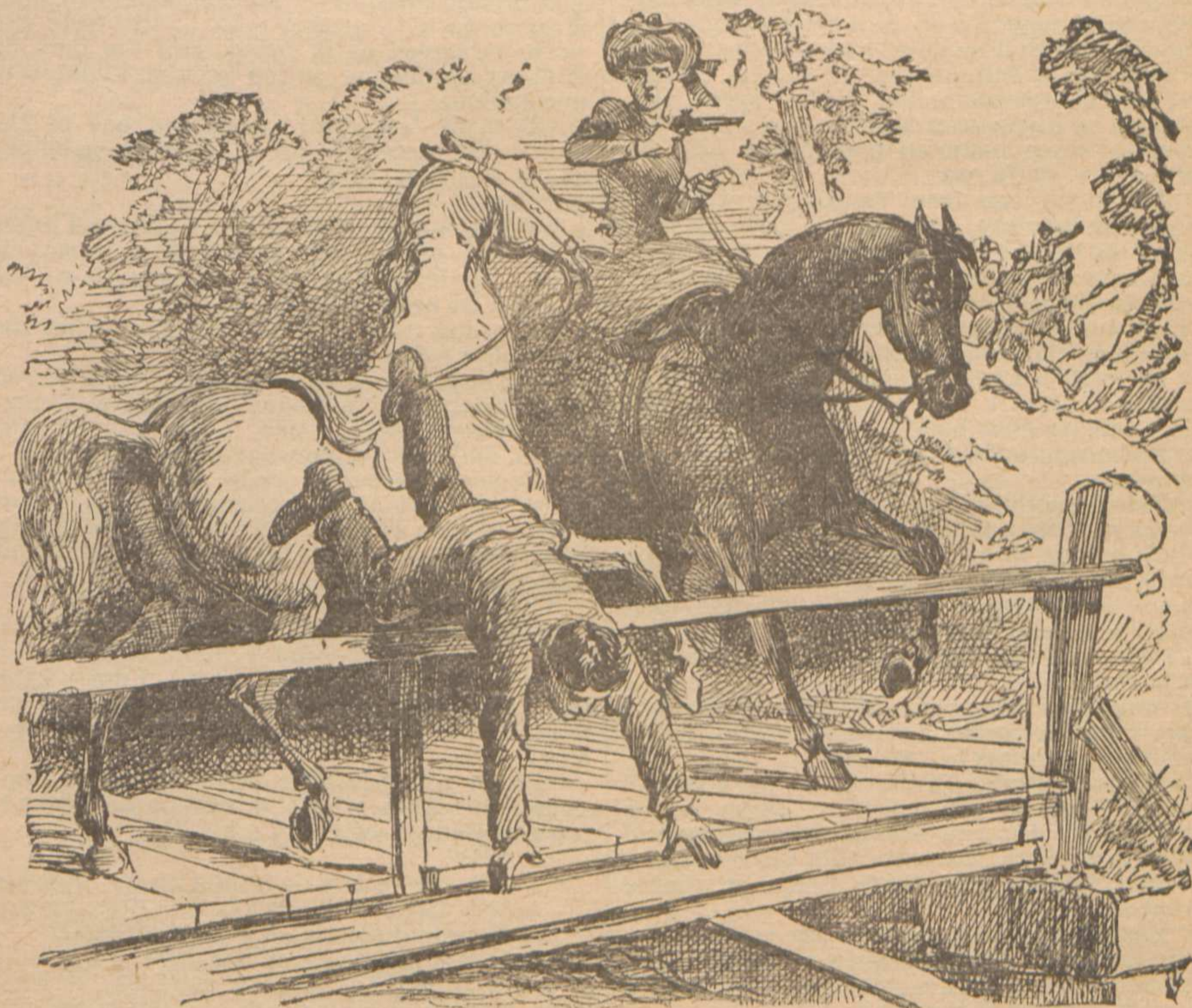
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Vol. XXXII.

DASHER DICK'S DEAD LOCK.

BY J. MILTON HOFFMAN.



MARK WAITED NOT A MOMENT LONGER, BUT SPRUNG FROM HIS HORSE TO THE RAIL OF THE BRIDGE
AND LEAPED HEAD-FIRST INTO THE WATER BELOW.

Dasher Dick's Dead Lock;

OR,

PLUCKY JOE.

The Boy Avenger's Last Ride.

An Exciting Adventure in the Life of
a Noted Outlaw.

BY J. M. HOFFMAN,
AUTHOR OF "NOBODY'S BOYS," "THE BORDER
ROVERS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CHANCE MEETING.

"WHICH way did he go?"

"Yonder. Don't ye see him?"

"Yes, yes; mount yer hosses, boys, and come on! Are ye ready?"

"All ready!"

"Then follow me. Lord! Just look at the kid ride!"

Three men from the cattle-ranch of Print Olive in Western Nebraska, mounted their horses and started in pursuit of a horseman whom they supposed to be a cattle-thief. The stranger was well mounted and had the start of his pursuers a full quarter of a mile. When first seen he was not going at full speed, and, not until he discovered that he was being followed by three mounted men, did he urge his horse into a swift run.

"I wouldn't run from 'em, only that I don't know who they are, or what they mean by chasing me as though I was a prairie wolf. Some white men are no better than Injuns in the matter of molesting innocent travelers."

Thus soliloquizing, he gave his horse the rein, and fairly skimmed over the prairie.

"He rides like Satan himself," said one of the men in pursuit. "I wonder whar he stole such a mighty good hoss?"

"Perhaps he raised it," suggested another of the men.

"Raised nothing!" grunted the third man savagely. "Sich fellers don't take the trouble to buy a hoss, or raise one from a colt; when they want a nag they jist steal it, and there's the end of it, unless they're caught, and then there's the end of 'em. See?"

There was no reply to this, and the pursuing party dashed on.

It was an exciting race. The prairie was like a sea of glass—broad, sweeping, billowy, and, seemingly, limitless in expanse.

"We are gaining on the rascal jist a trifle," remarked one of the pursuing party, as he measured the distance between themselves and the fugitive with his eye; "it's only a trifle, though. Mighty good thing thar's no timber hereabouts."

"Yas; wouldn't like to have the cuss get in to the timber," observed another of the men. "It's a clean prairie race this time for sure, with the odds in favor of the kid."

"How do ye know it's a kid?" questioned the first speaker.

"Why, by the looks of him. Thar is some little difference between a kid and a man. This chap ain't more than half-grown. But ye said something about us gaining on him, which, the same, isn't a fact, for, by the eternal! he is gaining on us."

Such, indeed, was the case. The gap between the pursuers and the pursued was gradually widening—a fact which caused the former to spur their horses forward to their full speed, while they, themselves, uttered low curses and fierce threats at every bound.

On, on they went—the hot, noonday sun shining down upon them, the wind whistling in their ears, horse and rider straining every nerve; each man with his body bent forward, his eyes gleaming; and each horse with his neck extended, nostrils dilated and mouth covered with foam. It was a race in which desperation, defiance, brutal desire, and stubborn determination held high carnival, and in which there was no thought of submission by either party.

For more than an hour this wild, mad race continued, then, all of a sudden, there occurred an accident that brought it abruptly to an end.

At the very moment when the race was at its swiftest, the horse of the fugitive, and the latter himself, were seen to suddenly fall to the ground and roll over in one common heap, and, strange to say, neither rose to his feet; the horse struggled as if dying, and the man, or boy, lay motionless on the ground, apparently unconscious.

"Both of 'em dead," remarked one of the men as the three rode up. "Providence helped us out this time, sure."

"How?"

"Why, don't ye see? The hoss stepped inter a hole of some kind, and, falling, broke his neck. As fer the feller—well, suppose we see whether he is dead or alive?"

He sprang from his horse and approached the motionless figure on the ground.

"Not badly bu'sted," he said; "only jarred up considerably. Thunder! but he's a desperate-looking chap! Come, boys, get off yer hosses, and let's decide what to do with him."

"Decide?" repeated one of the men, disdainfully; "it ain't at all necessary to argue that point. When a feller steals cattle there is only one punishment to give him, and that is to put him out of the way."

"Kill him, you mean?"

"Yes, kill him; that's the way to talk it. If this chap is guilty—and I know durned well he is—he'll have to suffer fer it. I don't have any mercy for cattle-thieves, bet yer life on that. What sort o' looking chap is this, anyhow?"

"Pretty rough-looking, as I said before," answered the man who had dismounted, "and, jest as I told ye, he's only a kid."

"A kid?"

"Yes, a kid—a boy—a young chap. Bet yer life he's a hard one. Why, he is jest covered with knives and pistols—a perfect arsenal."

The motionless figure on the ground was that of a lad of perhaps sixteen summers, a well-built, shapely-looking youth, dressed in the full

garb of the cowboy, even to his boots. The face and hands were very brown, the latter rather small and delicate. The head was of good shape, and was covered with a wealth of light-brown hair, worn long, almost to the shoulders.

In his belt were a brace of pistols, also a long-bladed knife with an edge like a razor.

The three men examined the body closely, not forgetting to remove the weapons from the belt and place them upon their own person.

"Rather a youthful cattle-thief," one of them remarked, carelessly. "It's a great pity the fall hadn't killed him."

"Cattle-thieves don't die that way," declared another of the men. "This feller is only a little stunned; he'll come to in a minute, see if he don't."

Sure enough, a few seconds later the prostrate form began to move, the heaving of the chest became more life-like, and presently the eyes opened and restoration of consciousness was complete.

Following this almost instantly the startled boy sprung to his feet.

CHAPTER II.

A TERRIBLE DANGER.

"Don't look so desperately defiant, young man," observed one of the men, as the boy looked sharply from one to the other of his three captors; "you seem to be kind o' mixed up in your head. What is the matter with you?"

"What does all this mean?" demanded the lad, quickly. "What have I done that you should follow me like a prairie wolf? I don't know any of you fellows. Who are ye?"

"It don't matter who we are," replied one of the men; "tell us who *you* are; we know what you are. Where do you live when you are at home?"

"On the prairie," was the short reply.

"And have you no other home?"

"I have not."

"Or never had?"

"Not for some years. I used to live in Kentucky; that was four years ago. I left there and came here."

"Why did you leave Kentucky?"

There was no answer.

The question was asked again.

Still no answer.

The same question was for the third time thundered into the ears of the boy. Then came a reply short and sharp:

"It is none of your business why I left Kentucky, nor is it any of your business why I am here."

"Then you refuse to tell us why ye left yer old home and come out here?"

"I do."

"And do ye refuse to give us your name?"

"Why should I? I am not ashamed of it! Call me Mark Ludington and you'll hit it about right."

"How old are ye?"

"Seventeen."

"What have ye be been doing lately?"

"Driving cattle. I have just left the trail from Texas, and am on my way back."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, sure. Why?"

"Because us fellers have concluded you are a cattle-thief," was the reply; "we've had ye spotted for more'n a week; you've been hanging around the ranch back here—sneaking around as though ye wanted to steal something. Oh, we've got the proof ag'in' ye, and mighty strong proof it is, too. What war ye prowling around the ranch fer, if it wasn't to steal cattle?"

"It wasn't to steal cattle, anyhow," replied the boy.

"What fer then?"

"None of your business."

The boy had scarcely said this when one of the men made a move as if to seize him by the throat, and instantly the small brown hand reached for a pistol with which to protect himself. The youth discovered for the first time then that he had been relieved of his weapons.

"We didn't intend you should use 'em on us," sneered one of the men, "so we jist took 'em from your belt quietly, you know—quietly."

"Stole them from me like a pack of cowards!" exclaimed the young man. "Give me back one of those pistols and I'll fight the crowd."

The challenge was not accepted, but instead the three men at once seized the defenseless lad and bore him to the ground. Then they tied his hands behind, pushed his hat on his head, and, despite his protestations, mounted him on one of the horses, following which the entire outfit started off in the direction of a strip of timber, two or three miles away.

"You have told your last lie, you thieving rascal," declared the leader of the cattle-men, "and I for one don't want any more nonsense. The long and short of it is you are nothing but a miserable thief, and the worst of it all, a cattle-thief. It's not you alone that is in this business, but a dozen other fellows of whom Dick Belmont is the leader."

"Dick Belmont!" exclaimed the lad, with a look of mingled surprise and terror; "did you say Dick Belmont?"

"Didn't say anything else," was the reply.

"Oh, you needn't pretend innocence; you know who Dick Belmont is just as well as I do; you know that he is the leader of a gang of desperadoes and cattle-thieves. Tell me you don't know Dick Belmont!"

"I never saw him in my life, not to my knowledge," declared the boy. "I have heard the name, though, lots of times—lots of times. Heavens! is it possible that Dick Belmont is in this part of the country?"

Little further reference was made to Dick Belmont during the short journey to the strip of timber toward which the men and their prisoner had started. The timber was reached in due time, and then dismounting, the half-savage bordermen took the captive boy and securely tied him to a tree, using long, twisted cords of green grass soaked in water with which to bind him.

All this while the lad protested stoutly, not only with his tongue, but by the use of his hands and feet; but he was no match alone for

the three powerful men, who soon had him so securely tied that he could scarcely move a muscle.

Then they began to collect a quantity of dry grass and sticks, which they piled around him, covering his feet and legs completely, and rendering him still more unable to help himself.

Finally, having accomplished that part of their work, the heartless wretches turned to the boy, and one of them asked him if he had anything to say why death should not be meted out to him as punishment for the crime of cattle-stealing.

"I am *not* guilty," was the emphatic reply, though the lips that spoke it were almost dumb with terror, and the heart seemed ready to burst from the heaving breast.

"You needn't tell us any more lies, you young devil," said the leader of the men; "we know you are one of Dick Belmont's gang, and that is enough. We never let a cattle-thief get away from us—never. The idea is right here, when you catch him, kill him; and now that we've got you, we intend to kill you. Shooting has been pronounced too good for a cattle-thief, so now we burn 'em at the stake. You see, we are determined to break up the business. Boys, have any of ye got a match?"

A match was produced at once, but before it could be lighted and touched to the dry leaves, the sharp crack of a rifle rung out upon the air, and the man nearest the boy fell flat on his face, shot to the heart. Then, almost at the same time, there sprung out of a clump of bushes a few yards away a rough-looking man, who, at a single bound, placed himself in the midst of the astonished ranchers.

Hesitating scarcely a second, he brought his revolver to bear upon the other two, and with two quick shots put a bullet into the breast of each, killing them instantly!

"Three of 'em, and all dead," exclaimed the stranger, laconically; and then he added, "I didn't get here any too soon, fer a fact. Why, they had the kid all ready to burn. A pious lot of cusses they are, to burn fellers at the stake, only because they belong to Dick Belmont's gang. But these fellers—well, they've gone whar they'll get a double dose of fire, dead sure!"

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

THE young prisoner was so badly frightened that he could scarcely comprehend the situation. His mind was in a whirl of doubt and fear. Scanning the face of the stranger to whom he owed his life, he said:

"Great heavens! but this is awful! you have saved me from a horrible death. The wretches would have burned me alive."

"But they're dead now, all of 'em," observed the stranger, carelessly. "Didn't I give it to 'em in a hurry?"

"Bet you did," replied the boy; "not one of 'em gave a second kick; served 'em right. But, who are you that you should help me out of such a scrape?"

"Better ask me first to cut ye loose from that tree," answered the man; "for perhaps I might take a notion to light the fire myself. I

could have a little picnic here all alone, couldn't I, young feller?"

"Yes, if you were bloodthirsty enough," replied the boy. "But I don't think you are that sort of a fellow. It's a fearful state of affairs when white men have to adopt the ways of the red-skins in the punishment of prisoners. You'll cut me loose, I reckon?"

"Yas, oh, yas; I'm not much given to mercy myself, but I wouldn't let you die there like a dog. I've killed a heap of men in my day, but never one by such torture as these chaps wanted to give you. I tell you, kid, when I see'd 'em getting ready to burn ye, I jist got awful mad, so here they are, sprawled out on the sand like so many dead dogs, and yonder are their hosses."

The latter was grazing a short distance away as unconcernedly as if nothing had happened.

"I want one of them nags," added the stranger, suggestively. "I've run down a hoss a day for the past week, and now I'm going it afoot. But you said something about getting yourself loose. Do ye really want to get free?"

"Yes, yes—cut me loose and I'll be the best friend you have on earth; I'll do anything for you."

"You won't take the first chance you get, and shoot me, will ye?"

"No, heavens, no!"

"And you won't tell anybody you have seen me, will ye—won't post my enemies on my whereabouts, and all else that ye know about me?"

"No—you may rely upon me. I shall tell nothing; in fact, I know nothing to tell. For Heaven's sake, cut me loose."

The stranger scattered the dry leaves and brush aside and cut the cords with which the young man was bound.

"You're a pretty fair sort o' a chap," he said; "consequently I'll help ye out fer once, anyhow. Don't get into another such a scrape, for next time I might not be able to help ye out. I believe I've never see'd you before. Who are you?"

It came over the boy all at once not to divulge his real name, in fact, not to impart any information concerning himself to this man. There was a strong feeling within him that the friendliness of the stranger was not spontaneous, but rather of a forced nature, and that it might change at any moment to intense hate. So he replied evasively:

"I'm nothing more or less than a cowboy. Don't I look like one? There isn't a chap on the trail that can handle a horse, or a whip, better than I can. I've scouted these prairies about four years."

"But yer name—you haven't told me yer name."

"They call me Plucky Joe, those who know me, which is about as good a name as any I know of. You've heard of Plucky Joe, I reckon?"

"But I have!" replied the man quickly.

"And so you are Plucky Joe?"

"That's what people call me."

"Well, I'm glad to meet you," declared the man; "for I've heard of you often. They say

you are very handy with the pistol. How many men have you killed lately?"

"None."

"None? Why, I thought you averaged a man a day. I do that much myself, and I'm nobody—only plain Dick Belmont."

At the sound of this name the boy started and gave his companion a searching glance. Then he said:

"I have heard of you oftener than you have heard of me, Dick Belmont; and it was because I was supposed to be a member of your gang that I was condemned to death by these cowardly wretches here on the ground before us. They swore to treat all of Dick Belmont's men alike—burn them at the stake as they would have burned me had you not arrived just in time to save me. You do not deny that you are the notorious Dick Belmont?"

"I do not," was the short reply. "I am Dick Belmont, the outlaw, upon whose head the Governors of four different States have fixed a price. But I do not intend to pass in my checks yet awhile; I am good for ten more years of solid life, and then I'll die with my boots on."

He looked the picture of perfect fearlessness and determination as he stood there leaning on his long rifle, his sharp black eyes scanning the face of his young companion.

He was a man above the average height, well-built, muscular, a hard, determined-looking face, restless, roving eyes, and a complexion almost as brown as that of an Indian. His age was about twenty-six.

He was known far and wide as a cattle-thief, desperado and murderer, and his name had long been a terror to peaceful citizens on the western frontier. Knowing the country well, he had no difficulty in escaping from the officers of the law, who were constantly looking out for him. The Indian Territory was his principal abiding-place, where he would flee when hotly pursued, and where he had friends to protect and conceal him at all times.

Such was the character of Dick Belmont, when, more for excitement than anything else, he saved the life of the young lad known as Plucky Joe.

The latter had also acquired considerable of a reputation, not as a desperate character like Dick Belmont, but as a fearless rider, an excellent shot and a gallant Indian-fighter.

There was one thing about him that seemed peculiar; he never remained long in a place, but was generally on the move, now in Texas, now in the Indian Territory, now in Nebraska, now in Colorado—always going somewhere, thus gaining for himself the reputation of a rover. Although known as Plucky Joe, the real name of the lad was Mark Ludington.

"And this is the wretch Dick Belmont," muttered the boy, as the outlaw turned aside for a moment. "Heavens! I almost wish he had not saved my life! The very man whom I have sworn to kill has placed me under everlasting obligations to him! Good for me that I did not tell him my real name; that would have been a fatal mistake; I must be Plucky Joe to him, for he knows that Mark Ludington has been searching for him for years. Heavens! Dick Belmont, the murderer!"

CHAPTER IV.

A FRIENDLY ENEMY.

DICK BELMONT was not the kind of a man to linger long in a place, or moralize to any great extent over his own or others' deeds of blood; so, no sooner had he learned all that he cared to concerning the young cowboy, than he wanted to be off.

"Let's get out of here at once," he said, "for, first we know, there will be a lot of fellows down upon us; these men will be missed, and everybody will say, of course, that Dick Belmont has murdered them. Come, let's be off, Mister Joe."

Mark Ludington hesitated.

"What are ye waiting for?" demanded the outlaw. "Didn't I save yer life?"

"Yes—yes."

"And didn't ye say ye'd stick to me until the end of time, Mister Plucky?"

"I did," was the reply.

"Then come on; don't fool away your time here. If you were not a thief and a robber before you met me you are now, and thar is no way to help it. Why, these very fellows took you for one of my gang and war going to burn ye alive. Think of that. The next time you fall inter such hands, you'll be a gone goose, and no mistake. Oh, you're in for it, so come with me, and I'll give you a chance to make a man of yerself."

"And these dead fellows—what are we to do with them?" asked Mark.

"Why, let 'em rot where they are," replied the outlaw savagely. "Didn't suppose it would pay to bury 'em, did ye?"

"There won't be anything left of 'em by morning," observed Mark thoughtfully; "the coyotes will polish their bones in no time. I can't say that I am sorry for 'em, seeing as how they wanted to roast me alive. That was awful!"

Dick Belmont laughed.

"You looked sort o' scared when I first saw ye, even ef yer name was Plucky Joe."

"Enough to make anybody look scared," returned Mark. "I thought my time had come, sure. Come to think of it, my pistols and knife were stolen by these wretches. Perhaps I had better get them at once."

He was not long in finding what he wanted, and in addition to his own weapons he took a short rifle belonging to one of the dead cattlemen, remarking as he did so that it was no more than right that he should receive some payment for the injuries he had sustained at the hands of these men.

The horses of the dead ranchmen were still grazing near by, and two of them were at once appropriated by Dick Belmont and his young companion, who, having mounted them, started off at full gallop, riding in the direction of the Indian Territory.

"Where are we going?" asked Mark presently; "we are leaving the regular Texas trail, and seem to be making one of our own. We are now in Kansas, I believe."

"Yas, we have just crossed the line. This is a dangerous country for you and me, Mister Plucky."

"Why?"

"Because here is where the big ranches are, and Dick Belmont hasn't many friends among the cattle-men. As a matter of fact, I reckon any of 'em would delight to shoot him on sight, eh, Plucky?"

"Then we are in considerable danger now," observed Mark thoughtfully.

"I should say so," was the reply; "and this last affair hasn't helped us any. I expect any moment to discover that we are being followed. What would you do in that case, Plucky?"

"Run, of course," replied Mark.

"And what if you were overtaken, what would ye do then, Joe?"

"Fight; what else could I do? I don't propose to take any chances with these wild cattle-men; some of 'em are worse even than Injuns. If they hadn't tried to burn me at the stake—"

"That was a villainous trick," interrupted the outlaw. "I don't blame ye for entertaining a sort of hatred for cusses of that kind, Plucky. If any of 'em should meet you again, I reckon they'd scalp ye first, and then burn ye."

"But they'll not meet me very soon again," remarked the boy. "I can protect myself, depend upon it."

They moved along rapidly over the rolling prairie, Dick Belmont leading the way. His acquaintance with the country seemed perfect, as also was his knowledge of the locations of the different cattle-ranches, which it was his object to avoid.

Riding hard the rest of that day, at night they came to an abandoned sod-house, where they determined to remain until morning.

"You have been here before?" questioned Mark, carelessly.

"Oh, certainly," was the reply. "The feller that lived here had a good lot of cattle once, but we broke him all up, and then he left—took the pistol route for glory. One of the boys got tired of his clatter and killed him. I'll show you his grave in the morning."

It was growing dark rapidly, and there was therefore no chance for investigation that night. Without delay they put their horses out to feed on the tender grass that grew richly around, and, returning to the house, prepared to make themselves comfortable for the night.

There was nothing to eat, and no blankets, consequently the conditions were not favorable to a quiet night's rest; nevertheless the two friends—for they were friends for the time being—lay down upon the hard floor and tried to sleep. Each slept with his rifle by his side, and other weapons in easy reach, for it was one of Dick Belmont's traits always to be ready for any emergency.

Nothing happened that night worthy of mention, and the next morning the travelers continued their journey southward.

"We'll get something to eat after a while," remarked the outlaw, as they galloped along. "About a dozen miles from here there are a few homesteaders, who are trying to raise a little grain and a few cattle; generally they'll give a feller something to eat when he asks for it; leastwise I don't reckon any of 'em will refuse me."

"Not if they know you, they won't," put in Mark.

"Wal, they know me," returned the outlaw shortly. "Bet yer life on that, Joe!"

They rode on in silence.

After a while they came to a stream of water, which they crossed, and followed its bank for several miles; then, striking out over the prairie, in a short time they reached a cultivated strip of ground in the center of which was a small house built partly of boards and sod.

"We'll stop here," announced Belmont, dismounting. "Git off yer hoss, Plucky!"

Two rough-looking men came to the door of the house and looked out.

"Halloo! Dick; glad to see you!" welcomed one of the men. "Come in!"

They turned their horses loose on the prairie, and entered the house.

CHAPTER V.

A SERIOUS SHOOTING SCRAPE.

MARK did not know what to think of the owners of the house whom Dick Belmont had designated as homesteaders.

They were certainly very rough men, and to all appearances were little better than robbers themselves.

There were three of them, all hard-looking characters, and whether they were homesteaders or not, Mark could not determine. He believed, however, that their real business was that of stealing stock, or rather that of picking up stray and abandoned cattle from the Texas trail, which amounted to about the same thing as stealing.

"I'll keep an eye on 'em, anyhow," said the boy, "for all the information I pick up concerning such wretches, Dick Belmont included, may be of benefit to me hereafter."

The three homesteaders seemed to be very well acquainted with Dick Belmont—a fact which certainly did not look well for them; and, at the same time, corroborated to a certain extent Mark's belief that the men were themselves little better than robbers.

At any rate, they were well supplied with food, of which their visitors partook heartily, for both were very hungry.

Then, after talking awhile on various subjects, a game of cards was proposed, and the four men seated themselves at a low table, and commenced playing.

Mark watched the progress of the game for some minutes, but there was little interest in it for him, so, finally, he opened the door of the house, and went out, remarking to Dick Belmont as he did so, that he would look after the horses.

Once on the outside, the young avenger gave himself up to earnest thought.

He thought of his present situation, how he was in company with one of the worst desperadoes of the border; how he had escaped a horrible death by the help of this man; how the two were now on their way to the Indian Territory, where he would be certain to encounter others of the robber gang. Then he wondered what would be the end of it all. He was certain of one thing, he was not going to turn rob-

ber himself; but then, if he did not do that, what should he do? It had reached a point on the Western border when it was not safe to be found alone away from any cattle-ranch, for the very fact of moving about without apparent purpose was enough to stamp such a person as a cattle-thief.

"I might go on the trail again," were the boy's thoughts; "but how do I know that I would not be taken for one of Belmont's thieves, and shot down like a dog? The cowboys themselves are fighting like so many prairie-wolves, so I can expect nothing from them. And then, here is another trouble; how am I to get away from Dick Belmont? He watches me like a hawk, and the moment I attempt to leave I'll have a bigger fight on my hands than I ever had before. To tell the truth, I don't want to leave him; there is a good reason why I should go with him. It has been four long years since I started on the search for this wretch, and now that I have found my man I must not let him escape me. I owe him my life, the villain; otherwise I would call him from the house this moment, and blow out his brains."

He spoke savagely and excitedly, and would have said more had not Dick Belmont's voice reached him at that moment.

"You lie, you scoundrel!" said the voice, in fierce, loud voice.

Then followed other angry exclamations, and presently there was a loud yell, mingled with fierce oaths, quickly followed by a number of pistol-shots, and then the door was burst down and out came Dick Belmont, pistol in hand, and immediately at his back were two of the men of the house, each having in his hand a pistol, with which he was trying to shoot the outlaw.

But the latter escaped unharmed, and, running to where his horse was grazing, mounted him at a single bound and dashed away like the wind.

As for Mark, not knowing or fully realizing the circumstances of the case, he made no attempt to follow the outlaw, but remained near the door of the house astonished and bewildered.

Then the men turned on him, and one of them said, savagely:

"You young devil, why did ye not follow your friend? I have a notion to blow out your brains! Curse you! how much better are you than Dick Belmont? Come in here and see what the wretch has done. It is as foul a murder as ever was committed."

A man was lying on the floor of the house weltering in his own blood.

He had been shot in three different places, one ball having pierced his heart.

"Poor Jack is dead, and your murderous partner is the one to blame," said the man, excitedly.

"He is not my partner," declared the boy, emphatically; "I met him yesterday for the first time. You have no right to implicate me in this murder."

"But you are one of the gang," insisted the man, still white with rage, "and I have a great mind to brain you on the spot."

"Stand back! stand back!" cried Mark, in a

threatening voice, at the same time taking a pistol in either hand from his belt and leveling them at the men who were confronting him. "The first one of you who dares to move will die in his tracks. I am not a murderer, neither am I a coward, and, mind you, I never missed a target in my life. *I am Plucky Joe, the cowboy!*"

The two men were astonished. Of the pluck and bravery of the young cowboy they had often heard, and it now occurred to them that he might take it into his head to shoot at any moment, in which case the outside of the house would be much safer than the inside, so one of them said:

"Let's quit this foolishness and go outside and talk it over. I don't like to do any shooting over poor Jack's body. Come, put up yer shooters."

Mark did not comply with this request, but, instead, with a pistol still covering each of the men, himself backed toward the door and out into the open air.

The men did not follow him; they had been close enough to the pistols of the redoubtable Plucky Joe; so, unmolested, the boy walked away from the house to where his horse was grazing, mounted the faithful animal and rode rapidly out of sight.

"And that's what a friendly game of cards will do sometimes," he said, as the horse subsided into a walk. "The usual ending is a little matter of this kind, from one to a dozen men killed, and everybody all broke up. It beats the dickens what fools some people are."

CHAPTER VI.

ALONE ON THE PRAIRIE.

Now that Mark was again completely his own master he felt that if he ran his neck into any new danger it was his own fault. As Plucky Joe he was ever ready for fight, but as Mark Ludington his game now was to avoid all chances of injury or arrest, for he had too much work before him to be put out of the field now.

He resolved, however, not to abandon that part of the country, but, instead, trace Dick Belmont to his lair, and learn as much about that noted desperado as he could, and, finally, wreck the vengeance which he had sworn to have years before.

"I run the risk of being taken for one of the gang myself," he said, "but for all that I must learn all about them; I must see the others of the gang, and see if the wretches I have been looking for so long are there. There are six of them in all, including Dick Belmont, who owe me their lives—six that I have sworn to kill. Not until all of them are dead will the terrible tragedy of four years ago be avenged."

By this time Dick Belmont was several miles in advance of him, a fact which threw Mark into doubt as to any direct route to the home of the outlaw gang; but, at any rate, the course must be nearly due south, which direction the boy resolved not to swerve from in the least.

"If I can only find the place, it is a good deal better that I pass through this country alone, or, at least, not in the company of Dick Belmont," observed Mark, as he hurried on.

"Dick don't appear to have a very good reputation along this border: he's done too much stealing, and killed too many people, I reckon."

The Indian Territory was distant at least one hundred miles from where Mark was now riding, and it was altogether probable that the rendezvous of the outlaws was somewhere in the interior of that territory fifty to a hundred miles from its border.

"It's not what I call a long trip," said the boy, "and there 'u'd be no trouble about my gettin' there if I only knew the way. One thing, I've got to look out for stopping-places along the route where I can get something to eat, for I don't want to die of starvation, anyhow."

There were scattering houses along the way, fifteen to twenty miles apart, some of them very miserable affairs, constructed wholly of sod, while others were excavations into the side of a hill, having more the appearance of a cave than anything else. Residing in these rude and lonesome places, far from civilization, were a rough class of men, some of them honest, industrious homesteaders, others of a careless, indifferent nature, while a large majority were reckless, unprincipled men, ready for any sort of adventure from small thieving to cold-blooded murder.

It was through this border country that Mark resolved to pass on his way to the Indian Territory.

He was well armed, had plenty of ammunition, his horse was fleet of foot, and being himself of a daring, fearless nature, he was not inclined to borrow trouble as to the dangers of the way.

So he headed his horse straight south and dashed along.

He went very rapidly, and by nightfall had put himself many miles distant from the scene of the mid-day tragedy.

And he did not halt with the night; he continued to move along over the prairie, his young mind filled with a strong desire to accomplish as great a distance as he could that day, and reach the Indian Territory at the earliest moment possible.

It was near midnight when he finally came to a halt. He had seen a glimmering light an hour previous, which seemed to denote the presence of a house on the prairie several miles away, and such it proved to be—a house not unlike the one from which he had escaped early in the day.

The light shone through a small window near the door, the latter being constructed of rough, unplanned boards, through which, in different cracked places, the light also shone.

Quietly and cautiously Mark approached the house.

He did not know that it would be safe to announce his presence at once, for it might be that the inmates of the house would receive him in an unfriendly manner—perhaps murder him without hesitation or delay.

Dismounting from his horse the boy slowly crept up to the window and looked in.

He was astonished at what he saw.

There, seated around the room, were half a dozen rough-looking men, the prominent figure

of the group, and the one seeming to attract the most attention, being no less a personage than Dick Belmont!

"I never see'd the kid until yesterday," Mark heard the outlaw say; which was enough to satisfy the boy that he himself was the topic of conversation.

Mark bent his head and listened.

The outlaw continued:

"Yas, some fellers had caught him," the brigand went on; "and having tied him to a tree were about to roast him alive when I told 'em to stop proceedings."

"Did they do it?" questioned one of the men.

"Did they?" sneered the outlaw; "I rather think they did. I killed the three fellers in less than no time, and then cut the kid loose. It was a slick job, and done up in a hurry."

The outlaw then went on to narrate the circumstances and particulars of the tragedy in which he had participated that day, closing with the remark that the homesteaders had in all probability murdered the boy in retaliation for the killing of one of their number by himself.

"But then it don't matter much," he added; "the kid was a little too smart for this country, anyhow; like as not I would have killed him myself in a day or two. I took him with me more for company than anything else. Take him all around, he was a pretty lively chap, and I'm just a trifle sorry he's dead."

The conversation then turned on other things, and listening close at the door Mark overheard a villainous plot to rob and murder an old man named Simington, who lived some twelve miles away, and who was supposed to have concealed in the house a considerable sum of money.

The plot was suggested by Dick Belmont, who had a few weeks previous stopped a day and a night at the old man's house, and learning from him that he would the next day sell for cash a hundred head of cattle, had concluded that he now had the money thus obtained concealed in the house.

"The time to kill a goose is when it's fat," declared the outlaw, laughing; "and the old man is about as ripe now as he ever will be. I propose that we go for him at once."

The decision was made by common consent, that early the next morning the party should visit the old man at his lonely cabin and deliberately rob and murder him.

Mark stood at the door and heard all that was said, and then and there he determined to defeat the villainous plot of the murderous gang, even if it cost him his life in so doing.

"I'll go at once and warn the old man of his danger," he said, as he moved quietly away from the door. "But how am I to find the place? I only know that it is south of here about a dozen miles, but there is absolutely nothing else to guide me. At any rate, I'll make an effort to find the place at once."

With this purpose in mind, he hurriedly mounted his horse and rode away.

CHAPTER VII.

A HORRIBLE TRAGEDY.

MARK rode rapidly over the prairie, going in a direction which seemed to him exactly south,

although in the darkness it was difficult for him to positively know one direction from another.

Still he went on, hopeful of the result of his mission, and yet fearful that he might not be able to find the place and notify the intended victim of his danger.

There was no moon that night, and by the light of the stars alone the lad was enabled to see the way.

After riding thus for more than an hour, he began to look for lights in the distance, before him and on either side of him, hoping to find a beacon of this kind which would prove to be the one he most desired to see.

But there was not a light to be seen anywhere; the prairie was a sea of darkness, with only the stars shining down upon it, and perfectly still save the distant barking of prairie wolves, or the cry of some lonely night-bird sailing through the air.

During the remaining hours of the night Mark kept close watch of the prairie, moving very slowly at times, then dashing along rapidly, and all the while thinking that his destination could not be far away.

So the night passed, morning came at last, and still no signs of a human habitation. Mark began to grow discouraged.

"There is no finding anything on these prairies," he growled. "I may not be within twenty miles of the place I am searching for. As it looks now, the old man will be murdered long before I can get there to warn him of his danger."

The sun came up, and the day wore on. Mark still wandered over the prairie. After awhile he came to a stream of water, the banks of which were covered with scrub timber and scattering clumps of bushes. Here the lad halted, and, dismounting from his horse, began to search for game among the trees and bushes. He found what he was looking for shortly—a rabbit of the cotton-tail species, which he brought down with a single shot from his pistol.

To dress the rabbit, build a fire and roast it, was the work of a very few minutes, and Mark was hungry enough to enjoy the simple repast hugely.

Following this, he watered his horse in the stream, and, after deliberating a short time as to which way he should go next, started off over the prairie.

A clump of cottonwoods four or five miles away had attracted his attention for some while previous, and it was toward these that he now took his way.

"Very likely there is a house behind those trees," he said, "and if so, perhaps it's the very house I want to find. I'll get over there in a hurry."

His horse galloped along freely and soon brought him to where he could see the clump of trees distinctly.

There was a small house behind the trees, as he supposed, a fact which warranted the belief that he was at last nearing his destination.

He rode up to the house boldly.

There was no sign of life about the premises, nothing to indicate that the place was inhabited.

Dismounting from his horse, Mark walked boldly up to the door.

The latter was closed, but bore evidence of having been opened recently.

Before venturing to open the door Mark took a good look at the exterior of the house.

Then he surveyed the door again, and this time was startled at what he saw. There were spots of blood upon the door, also the imprint of bloody fingers.

"Human blood," said Mark, quietly.

He opened the door, and a flood of light swept through the room.

He went in.

There was no one to bid him welcome or demand his reasons for entering the house uninvited.

He looked about the room.

There were chairs and tables, a small cooking-stove, pans, pails and dishes, and a low bed in the room.

The latter bore the appearance of having recently been occupied. The quilts were thrown back to the foot of the bed, all but one, which was spread out carelessly from foot to headboard.

Looking closer, Mark noticed that the quilt was stained with blood.

The discovery was accidental, but none the less surprising, for that reason.

Mark hesitated a moment before pulling aside the quilt, for something told him that it covered a horrible sight.

He did so, however, in a moment, and was prepared for the sight which followed.

There on the bed, lying on his back, with his hands on his breast, his head sunk deep into the pillow and his face upturned was a man with his throat cut from ear to ear.

The lower part of his face and his neck and breast were covered with blood, which gave the body a ghastly appearance.

Mark surveyed the bloody scene a moment in silent horror.

The dead man was perhaps fifty years old, gray-haired, thin of body and small of stature.

"I came too late," said Mark, turning aside. "This is another of Dick Belmont's victims—old man Simington, I believe the villains called him. Well, anyhow, he is dead, and there is no doubt that Dick Belmont murdered him. The poor old man; I did not get here in time to warn him of his danger. I wonder what I had better do, now that he is dead."

The boy was half inclined to notify the authorities of the nearest settlement of the murder. This seemed to him the proper course to pursue; but his experience with the rough and uncertain ways of frontier justice had not been at all pleasant on past occasions, hence he was loth to make himself a party to any sort of transaction in which the law was concerned.

"I'll go on my way and let somebody else do the notifying," he said, at length, starting for the door.

He went out hurriedly and mounted his horse which had been grazing near.

"Which way now?" he said, speaking aloud, and thinking of what his next move should be. "I must leave this neck of the prairie as soon as possible, but I scarcely know which way to go."

He walked his horse a few yards further

Plucky Joe, the Boy Avenger.

from the house and again halted and began talking to himself:

"I may as well follow Dick Belmont, for two reasons; one is that I have some unsettled business with both himself and his gang, and the other is that I am about as safe with him as with anybody else, at present. At any rate, I shall not rest easy until I have accomplish the mission I set out to perform four years ago."

And putting spurs to his horse he rode swiftly away.

CHAPTER VIII.

AGAIN A CAPTIVE.

MARK had not gone a great distance when he was halted by three men who suddenly sprung from a thicket near the roadside and confronted him.

Quick as a flash the boy pulled his revolver, but one of the men already had him covered with an old blunderbuss of a gun, which, had it gone off, would have been fatal to the person at whom it was aimed.

"Put up your pop, my fine fellow," demanded the owner of the blunderbuss, "or I'll blow the top of yer head off in an instant. You hear me? Well, then, do as I tell you."

"By what authority do you halt me in this way?" asked Mark; "isn't this prairie open to the public?"

"Open to the public?" repeated the man; "well, I should say so, but it's no sort of a highway for thieves and cut-throats. You got a little too far East this time, young fellow, and now, I reckon, you're in for a taste of first-class justice, sich as ye don't find outside of a civilized community. This is the State of Kansas, and don't you forget it, and this is the first organized county on the western border of the State, and don't you forget that also; and there's something more that I don't want you to forget, and that is that I am sheriff of the county."

"But I don't understand what all this has to do with me," remarked the boy ranger, quietly.

"Don't ye, though?" returned the man. "It's too awfully bad about you; I wouldn't be so green as you are for anything. I suppose you never heard of old man Simington."

Mark knew what was coming next.

"Yes, I have heard of the old man, he replied.

"I thought so; a nice old man, wasn't he?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? Strange that ye don't know. Didn't you see him pretty often?"

"Never saw him but once in my life," answered Mark.

"Never but once? When was that?"

"A few moments ago."

"Ah! he was well, I suppose."

"Not very; he looked pretty well used up when I saw him; had a good deal of color in his face though."

"Perhaps he had been drinking."

"No, it was blood."

"Blood!"

"Yes, blood. The old man was dead."

"Dead! Somebody had killed him then, I reckon."

"No doubt about it," returned the boy; "his throat was cut from ear to ear; he could not have done it himself, of course."

"No, I suppose not," said the talkative sheriff.

"Do you have an idea who did do it?"

Mark did not reply. There were a number of things came into his mind at that moment. He might tell the officer all that he knew concerning the plot to murder the old man, and also give him to understand that Dick Belmont was the responsible party to the affair, but what good would this do him? Whatever he might say would not be believed, and he therefore determined to keep his knowledge of the affair to himself.

"You don't know who murdered the old man then?" said the sheriff.

"How should I know anything about it?" demanded Mark; "I wasn't present at the time. How does it happen that you are so well posted on the affair?"

"It's my business to be posted," returned the man. "I've been out for a day or two looking after hoss-thieves, and, happening along here, I went in to see the old man, when, by Jove! he was jist breathing his last. So these two fellers and myself have been watching around here for an hour or two to see what we could see, and you are the first chap to put in an appearance. You may be as innocent as a lamb, young man, I don't know, but, anyhow, the circumstances are suspicious, and I'll have to gather you in."

"Then you arrest me for the murder?" said the boy, again involuntarily reaching for his revolver.

"Keep down yer gun," cried the sheriff, quickly, again bringing his blunderbuss to bear on the young man's head; "this thing might go off, and if it should, your remains would be scattered somewhat, and don't you forget it. Yes, I arrest you for the murder of old Bill Simington. I don't say that ye'r' guilty, but it looks that way very much. At any rate, I'll take ye in, and ye'll have a chance to prove yer innocence, when the time comes. Now, don't try to get away, for it won't do ye any good; there are three of us, and all armed to the teeth, and the first suspicious move ye make I'll have the artillery open fire, and there won't be enough left of ye to feed a grasshopper. So move along quietly."

The men had horses tied near by, which they mounted and all started off at once over the prairie.

They traveled rapidly for more than an hour without halting, then the party came in sight of a low cabin at the foot of a long divide in the prairie, and at the door of this cabin the first halt was made.

It was several minutes before Mark recognized the cabin as the one in which he had the night previous seen Dick Belmont and two others, and overheard their villainous plot to murder old Bill Simington.

Springing from his horse, the sheriff opened the door without ceremony.

"Anybody here?" he said, roughly.

"You're mighty right there is," replied a

voice from some point inside the house. "I'm here. Halloo! old man! you get around once in a while, don't ye? Who are you after now?"

The sheriff appeared to be on friendly terms with the man of the house.

The latter went on:

"I wasn't expecting visitors around yer," he said, "or I'd 'a' fixed up somewhat so as to entertain 'em properly. But you haven't told me who yer after."

"After nobody in particular, jist now," answered the sheriff; "I've got the chap already, I reckon."

"Have you? You don't say! Who is he? Where is he? What has he been doing?"

"Old man Simington was murdered last night," said the sheriff, quietly.

"Old man Simington!" repeated the man of the house; "and you found him dead?"

"Yes, and here is the chap we think did the job for him. Look!"

Mark was pointed out to him, and, starting back, he exclaimed quickly:

"The very fellow that axed me yesterday the way to old man Simington's; said he was a relative of the old man; I told him which way to go, and he went on. Yes, you are mighty right; he is the murderer!"

CHAPTER IX.

SERIOUS TROUBLE FOR THE YOUNG RANGER.

"THEN you have seen this young man before?" questioned the sheriff of the man of the house.

"Saw him yesterday," was the reply; "he rode up to the door and axed me the way to Simington's, and I told him, then he went on. Oh, he'll probably deny it; see if he don't; they always do so, sich fellows."

When face to face with Mark the man still stuck to his story, and fairly astonished and confounded the boy with his barefaced lying.

"Yes, I understand you," finally said Mark; "you are the murderer yourself and wish to put it off on me; you are a miserable coward, not fit to live, and certainly not fit to die. Tell me, who was here last night besides yourself?"

"Nobody," replied the man boldly.

"You did not see Dick Belmont?"

"No."

"Do not know him, I suppose?"

"I have seen him; that is all. I do not keep company with such characters. Dick Belmont knows better than to come into my house. But, say, kid, tell us the truth now, ain't you a partner of Dick in the murdering business? Come to think of it, you must have had help in doing this job."

"Dick Belmont is a better man than you are, anyhow," observed the boy disdainfully; "you are the meanest wretch I ever remember to have met. I'd like mighty well to get a crack at you with this."

And he tapped his revolver suggestively.

"Better take them air weapons away from him," remarked the man alarmedly; "first ye know he'll try to shoot some of ye."

"Jist what I want him to do," observed the sheriff, with a grin; "then I'll have some excuse for killing him. I haven't killed a man for

a month, and I'm jist dying for some fun of that kind. But, since you've given him the hint, I'll take the weapons away from him, and I reckon I'll not get a chance to shoot him now."

Mark turned over his knife and pistols without a murmur.

"Oh, we're a poison crowd," remarked one of the men, with a tantalizing look at the young prisoner.

"Not necessary for you to tell me that," returned the boy; "my ears are good, and so are my eyes; it's plain to see what sort of a crowd you are. Come, you are not going to stay here forever, I hope."

The sheriff remounted his horse.

"You'll appear against this feller, I reckon?" he said, speaking to the homesteader.

"Yes, I'll tell all I know about him," was the reply.

"Which is enough to hang him, durned if it ain't," observed the sheriff; "but, ten to one, the Vigilantes will save ye the trouble of testifying; nobody gets it in the regular way nowadays; if there is fair proof of a prisoner's guilt, the Vigilantes take charge of the case at once. But I'll let ye know when ye'r wanted, depend upon it."

They rode away, Mark still a close prisoner.

"I threw it on to the boy in good shape," remarked the proprietor of the cabin, the moment his visitors were gone. "You are a cunning fellow, Jack Allen, and no mistake; you played your cards well. Now, the end of it will be this: the Vigilantes will hang the young rascal at once, and very soon the murder of old Bill Simington will be forgotten. As for Dick Belmont—well, Dick is able to take care of himself every day in the year."

It was late that night when the sheriff, with his prisoner, reached the settlement which was the seat of government of the frontier county of Ford.

He placed his prisoner in jail, and told him he might starve until morning, as he had nothing to give him to eat that night.

The jail was a large stone structure, long and rambling, with a row of cells on one side, and the remaining portion fitted up as a place of residence for the sheriff and his family.

The latter consisted of a wife and daughter—the daughter a rollicking, dare-devil creature, possessing much the same spirit as her father.

Her age was about sixteen.

She met her father at the door when he returned that night, and her first remark was in regard to the prisoner, whom she at once scanned critically and with some little curiosity.

"For a hoss-thief, I call him a very good-looking chap," she said. "Where did you catch him, dad?"

"Oh, I caught him," replied her father, evasively. "Ain't he an elegant specimen of the hoss thief, Sal?"

"He's all of that," declared the girl quickly. "he's a daisy."

"But he isn't a hoss-thief, Sal; that is, I didn't arrest him for that. I gathered him in on another charge."

"Yes? what?"

"Murder?"

The girl opened her mouth and eyes at the same time, and looked wild.

"Murder!" she repeated; "not this little cuss!"

"Yes, this little cuss; he killed a man over here dead as a nail—cut his throat from ear to ear. It was one of your friends, too."

"No! well, now who was it?"

"Old Bill Simington!"

The girl appeared very much astonished; she was silent for a moment, evidently revolving in her mind the possible details of the murder. Presently she spoke, and her language was energetic in the extreme.

"I'm glad of it," she said; "the old rat ought ter have kicked the bucket long ago. The miserable old sinner, he axed me to marry him, and I wouldn't do it. The old fool! What did he want to marry me for? I have hated him since. And you tell me he was laid out by this kid?"

"It looks that way, Sally," replied the sheriff, with a glance at the prisoner.

"And he cut the old man's throat?"

"Ripped it open from ear to ear."

"And you are sure it was no one else than old Bill Simington?"

"Sure—mighty sure."

"Good! Served him right! and you may bet your life that I am a friend of the kid; and I'm going to shake hands with him, right now."

She seized Mark by the hand and shook it vigorously.

"Don't be sich a 'tarnal fool, gal," at length protested her father, his temper rising; "ye'r' wuss nor a colt turned loose in a clover patch. It would have been a good thing fer ye if ye had 'a' married old Bill Simington, fer he 'u'd have tamed ye down a bit, I reckon."

With this he bolted the cell door, and Mark was left alone.

CHAPTER X.

LIFE IN A FRONTIER JAIL.

THE young prisoner, being very tired, soon fell asleep, and when the sheriff came to his cell door in the morning he was still sleeping.

"If you are as hungry as you are sleepy," remarked the man of the law, as Mark came to the door rubbing his eyes, "you must be about half-starved. There is a small lay-out that Sally fixed up fer ye. Queer gal, that Sally."

There were several articles of food on a wide board used as a server, in all a very fair breakfast.

"It looks good enough for a prince," observed Mark, as he seized the board with both hands. "Give Sally my compliments; she's the boss girl to fix me up such a good breakfast. I reckon it's because she thinks I killed old Bill Simington."

"That's it exactly," laughed the sheriff; "she hadn't any use fer old Bill—not any. The old man wanted to marry her, and it made her so mad that I thought once or twice she'd kill him herself. A queer gal is Sally; and you ought to see her when she gets mad; oh, then she's a

perfect terror; just like her father for all the world."

"Does she help you here much?" asked Mark, wishing to continue the conversation.

"Yes, a good deal," replied the sheriff; "she's mighty handy with a pistol, and can stand guard like a man. I keep her down yer watching the prisoners a part o' the time, and she seems to like it. She shot one feller the other day as he was trying to escape."

"Killed him?"

"No, not quite; only winged him; he was making off on a dead run."

The young ranger asked a few more questions concerning Sally, and then spoke of himself, and inquired if he could not have a hearing before some magistrate of the law.

"I reckon you kin," replied the sheriff. "I'll take ye over to 'Squire Blazier's at once; he's a good 'un; he'll fix ye up in no time."

The news of the murder of old Bill Simington had been generally circulated throughout the town, and small knots of men were gathered on the street corners discussing the affair.

The sheriff hurried the prisoner into the office of 'Squire Blazier, the chief magistrate of the town, and informed that worthy that the supposed slayer of old Bill Simington was before him.

The examination lasted only a few moments. 'Squire Blazier was a man of decisive action. He was positively ignorant of law, but that did not matter; he understood perfectly what was required of him as a frontier justice of the peace.

Mark was first asked his name.

He gave it as William Penn, a cowboy, from Nebraska.

He had good reasons for not giving his right name.

"William Penn," repeated the old 'squire, elevating his spectacles; "seems to me I've heard that name before somewhere. And you plead not guilty to the charge of murdering William Simington, of Deer Creek Hollow?"

"I do," replied Mark.

The sheriff then gave his testimony, all that he knew concerning the boy, how and where he had found him, what Jack Allen, the homesteader, had said about him, and the result was that Mark was returned to jail to await the action of the district court, which would convene in about four weeks from that time.

"Isn't there such a thing as getting out on bail?" asked Mark, who had a very imperfect idea of the machinery of the law.

The sheriff laughed.

"Nobody gets bail in this country," he said; "and anyway, I reckon you are not very well fixed for money, unless, perhaps, you got a big raise off old Bill Simington; did ye, kid?"

Mark did not reply. He did not feel in a very good humor over the prospect of remaining in jail a month, and then being tried for murder in a court which bore with it the certainty of conviction in cases like the one charged up against the boy.

There was another fear which continually troubled the repose of our young friend.

The people of the frontier were wont to take

the law into their own hands on occasions like this, and there was no telling when they might take it into their heads to hang every prisoner in the jail, Mark included.

The boy did not rest easy under the fearful suspicion.

Every unusual noise outside the jail seemed to denote something terrible for the prisoners.

The first few days of his incarceration, the young ranger suffered mental pain greater than he ever had before in all his life.

Finally, it becoming evident that mob law was not contemplated in his case, his mind resumed its usual repose, and he began to look forward to the day of trial.

He thought it all over, and the more he considered the circumstances of the case, the blood-thirsty disposition of the people, the rude manner of conducting suits on the frontier, the general desire to hang somebody, guilty or not guilty, as an example to others, the more he believed that his time had nearly come.

"It will simply amount to this," he said. "The case will be pushed against me for all it is worth. The sheriff will give his testimony, which alone is enough to hang a man in this country, and then Jack Allen, who is the real murderer, will come in and tell a pack of lies. The end will be that I will be convicted and swung into the air before I am three months older. No, it won't do for me to stand trial. I must make a break for liberty the first opportunity; I must get out of this hole some way or another, even if I have to kill somebody in doing it. I haven't had a chance to look about the place much; reckon it's almost air-tight; but I can't tell as to that only by observation."

There were several persons in the jail, charged with different crimes.

Mark had not seen any of them yet, but he had heard some loud talking and swearing, and was of the opinion that two or three of them, at least, were exceedingly hard cases.

"Half of 'em are in for murder," observed Sally, the sheriff's daughter, one day to Mark as he accosted her at the door of his cell, and entered into conversation with her. "There will be a general hanging in a few weeks, I reckon, and Sally Jones is the gal what's going ter pull the rope fer every one of them."

"Sally Jones?" repeated Mark, inquiringly.

"Yes, that's what I said; that's my name every day in the year; I am Sally Jones, and don't you forget it."

"And do you help do the hanging?" asked Mark, searchingly.

"Dad and I hang 'em," was the reply. "It's a heap of fun to hang a real murderer."

"Then you won't have any fun in hanging me," said Mark quietly, "for I am not a real murderer."

Sally did not reply.

CHAPTER XI.

MARK MAKES A BREAK FOR LIBERTY.

SALLY JONES came to see Mark frequently in his cell.

The boy had evidently impressed her favorably; or perhaps it was because he was sup-

posed to have murdered old Bill Simington, her would-be lover, that she took a liking to him.

She had thoroughly detested Simington, and now there were indications that she thoroughly liked Mark, a fact which the latter encouraged to the extent of his ability.

Her father had given her orders not to talk with the prisoners, but as he was absent from the jail a good part of the time she ran no risk in disobeying him.

"I shall do as I please about that," she had said to herself, and forthwith made herself free with the prisoners, particularly with Mark, whom she talked with by the hour.

Once she asked the young ranger to give her the details of the murder of old Bill Simington.

"I know ye killed him," she said; "but how did ye do it? what did ye do it with? what did he say? and did he make much fuss about it? Give me the full particulars of the way ye laid out the miserly old coon."

Mark did not like to say much about the murder of Simington to the girl. There were several reasons for this. In the first place it was because he was supposed to have committed the murder that she had taken so much interest in him, and he therefore did not like to deny it; and, as for declaring himself the murderer when he was not, he could not think of such a thing for a moment. So he neither denied or affirmed the charge when talking to Sally, and so retained her friendship and confidence.

"Do you really think they'll hang me?" he said to the girl one day, when the subject of the murder was mentioned.

"I reckon they will," replied the girl, emphatically. "I feel kind o' sorry fer you, but there is nothing that I kin do to help it."

"Just put yourself in my place, Sally," said the boy, "and don't you suppose I'd do something for you?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I do; I wouldn't see you hang for all the gold in the world. I'd help you escape from jail, that's what I'd do."

"Would you though?"

"Bet I would. I wouldn't see you hang, not for killing such a tarnal old fool as Bill Simington. Now, if I had stolen a horse—"

"Then you'd have to go certain," put in the girl; "but for killing such a man as Bill Simington—well, I don't think you deserve any punishment. I have half a notion to turn you loose."

"Do it, Sally," cried Mark, his young heart beating wildly; "give me my liberty, and I'll bless you forever."

"But what would dad say?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"He'd be mad enough to flail me alive. He's a terror, dad is, when he gets mad. Oh, I don't dare do it."

"But your father need not know that you have helped me escape," persisted Mark.

"How could he help knowing it?"

"Bring me some tools, and I'll cut my way out," said Mark, "then I'll climb to the window, and leap to the ground."

"And break your fool neck," put in Sally. "I won't do it: I don't dare do it. There isn't

any way that I can help you. I reckon you'll have to hang."

"And you declare then that you will not help me get away?" said the boy.

The girl hesitated.

"Only on one condition will I help you," she said.

"Name it," returned Mark, quickly.

"That you take me with you," replied Sally, with a laugh. "I think it would be just splendid to run away with a murderer! What do ye say?"

Mark was silent a moment, his mind engaged in rapid thought.

What would be the consequences should he elope with this girl?

Evidently she had either fallen in love with him, or was bent on creating a sensation in order to gratify a love for romance.

Mark did not know what answer to make, the proposition had come so very unexpected and sudden.

"Speak quick, young man," cried the girl; "shall we call it a bargain? Now, or never. It's either you, or the horse-thief in the next cell, I don't much care which; I'm bound to make a break with somebody. Will you elope with me to-night, or will you stay and get yer neck stretched like a cowardly dog? Come, what do ye say?"

Mark hesitated no longer.

It was a matter of life or death with him now.

He would have eloped with the blackest of negro wenches under such circumstances.

So would any other person of good sound sense.

"Never mind the horse-thief, Sally," he remarked, eagerly; "I'll go with you, and don't you ever forget it. I am just dying to be off. What a sensation it will create! Can you get a couple of good horses, Sally?"

"Yes, two good ones."

"Whose are they, Sally?"

"My father's—the old man's."

"Are they fleet of foot?"

"Can they run? I should say so."

"Well, get them ready, and to-night we'll get out of this in a hurry. Is there a moon these nights, Sally?"

"Yes, a good round one."

"So much the better. We can get a long distance before morning, and then if they catch us they'll do a mighty sight better than I think they will. How will you manage to let me out, Sally?"

"Oh, I don't know; jist steal the key out of dad's pocket, I reckon, and let you out in the regular way."

"Well, all right; any way to suit yerself; only don't fail to be on hand at the proper time. Come at midnight, Sally, at midnight."

Some one was heard coming at that moment, and Sally dodged away.

The sheriff passed along the row of cells, and then, after looking around awhile, returned to another part of the building.

Time passed. Mark was restless during the remaining hours of the day, and the midnight hour found him nervous, anxious and expectant.

Finally he heard the rustle of a woman's dress.

and the next moment Sally tapped at the door of his cell.

"All ready," whispered Mark.

The girl opened the cell door with a key which she had stolen from her father's pocket.

"Quick, kid, quick!" she said.

Mark quickly vacated the cell, and a few seconds later he and Sally were safely outside the jail.

CHAPTER XII.

A DOUBLE FLIGHT.

MARK felt like shouting for joy the moment he found himself outside the jail.

"I really believe I shall have to yell," he said, seizing his companion by the hand.

"Don't ye do it, boy," whispered Sally, hurriedly; "dad 'll wake up in a moment, and then what *would* become of us? Come with me."

They glided along the high stone wall that encircled the jail, and there, in the shadow of a clump of trees and bushes, were two horses, saddled and bridled, and ready to start the moment they were given the orders.

"These are the old man's swiftest," remarked the girl, looking at the two waiting horses; "I'd like to see anybody catch us now. Come on. Are ye ready?"

She sprung into the saddle with only the slightest effort, and again told Mark to mount his horse.

The boy did so at once, and then the two started off, going slowly at first, so as not to make any considerable noise, and then, reaching a safe distance from the jail, they gave their horses the reins, and dashed away at full speed.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, romantic in its loveliness.

The young ranger was not much of a sentimentalist, but he could see that Sally was given to sentiment and romantic notions a good deal.

He believed that her only purpose in running away with him was to gratify this romantic instinct.

At any rate, it was a good thing for him that she was so inclined, and now that she had done so much for him, he resolved to repay her to the best of his ability and to the extent of his opportunities.

Very little was said by either of the runaways for the first two hours of their flight; they dashed along so rapidly that it was impossible to carry on a conversation with any degree of comfort.

At length, their horses becoming badly winded, they brought them down to a walk, which was kept up for a full half-hour, during which time the runaways discussed the situation in full.

"This is a jolly break," said the girl, indulging in a hearty laugh. "I promised myself, long ago, that I would run away with the first good-looking murderer that dad brought in. Won't the people stare, though, when they find it out! and jist think of how they'll open their eyes!"

"And your father, Sally—what will he say?"

"Oh, he'll be mad, I reckon," replied the girl; "he'll follow us, of course."

Mark very much regretted the fact that Sally

had not provided him with a weapon of some kind, but, as it was, he would have to rely upon his ability to run more than on his ability to fight.

"I haven't even so much as a toothpick," he remarked to the girl, in explanation of what he would do in case her father should overtake them. "Now, if I had a brace of pistols—"

"I didn't intend ye should have any pistols," interrupted the girl.

"No? Why not?"

"Because I didn't want ye to shoot anybody. Why, you might kill the old man!"

"But a pistol would be a handy thing to have in the crowd, anyhow," observed Mark, wondering what else the girl could mean by her objections to a weapon.

Sally made no reply, and the two rode on some minutes in silence.

There was another thing that puzzled Mark a good deal about this girl.

She watched him very closely, and still seemed to regard him as a prisoner.

And this was not all. Instead of providing them with two fleet-footed horses, as she had agreed to do, Mark discovered at once that both the horses were very slow of gait and almost as clumsy as oxen as compared with other horses.

"These are not your father's best horses, are they, Sally?" at length asked the boy, for, notwithstanding she had told him they were, he had good reason to believe otherwise. "Tell me truly, you didn't get the best horses, did ye, Sally?"

"No, of course not, you silly fool," coarsely answered the girl.

"Kind o' strange that you didn't," said Mark, sharply. "How do you expect we are to get away on such plugs as these? Why, your father will overtake us before morning."

"That's what I want him to do," replied the girl, with a quiet laugh.

"Sally!"

Mark began to think the girl was crazy.

"Didn't suppose I was running away with ye for good, did ye?" she asked, contemptuously. "Why, I'm only out for a short lark. If dad don't overtake us by morning of course we'll go back—of course we will."

"Of course we will not," returned the boy, stoutly. "What do you mean, girl?"

"Jist what I say."

"And you don't call this running away for good?"

"No."

"Then what do you call it?"

"A lark. I want to astonish dad and all the rest of the people—make them open their eyes. I planned it for them to capture us about morning; but if they don't—why, we'll go back ourselves."

"You will, perhaps, but I won't, by a long shot," remarked the young ranger, resolutely.

"Won't you, though?" said the girl.

"Bet yer life I won't," returned Mark.

Nothing more was said for several minutes, during which time Mark thought over the situation hurriedly.

He was now beginning to see the real purpose of the girl, her motive in running away with

him, and her idea of what the result would be. Evidently all she intended to do was to take him out for a short airing, with the idea that she could return with him whenever she saw fit. Just why she should have concluded that Mark would obey her command in this respect the boy was at a loss to know, but certain it was that she looked upon him as still a prisoner.

"It will soon be morning," at length said the boy; "and your father does not come. I think he will not overtake us."

"No; then let's go back."

"Go back? Return to jail? What do you mean?"

Both halted at the same time, and in the light of the early morning, surveyed each other critically.

"Talk to me about going back," continued the boy, angrily; "I'll never go back—never!"

"Won't you, though?"

Quick as a flash the girl pulled a huge pistol from her dress pocket and leveled it at the boy's head.

"You'll go back now, I reckon," she said quietly. "Right-about-face, march!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TOO MUCH FOR SALLY.

"TELL me you won't go back with me?" cried the girl; "why, I'll blow the top of your head off in less than no time. Come, move along!"

The pistol was still at Mark's head, and Sally's finger was on the trigger.

"Don't shoot! don't shoot!" cried the boy, in evident fear of his life. "Why, I am surprised at ye, Sally. You are not really going to take me back?"

"Bet I am!" averred the young woman.

"Do you see this gun close to your nose?"

"Yes, I see it."

"Well, it barks seven times, so you want to look out how you fool with it; and don't you ever forget that Sally Jones is a dead shot. Come, we've gone fur enough. Dad don't seem to catch on to the racket very well, so we'll go back without any of his help."

They started to return, Mark a little in advance of his companion, the latter with one hand grasping the bridle-reins, and the other still holding the revolver.

"I'm just about as much a prisoner as ever, so it seems," remarked the boy, as they rode along. "I'd like mighty well to know how all this is going to end."

"I reckon we'll meet dad after awhile," answered Sally, "and then I'll turn you over to him. He won't kill you, I reckon—not right away, anyhow. The end will be that you'll go back to jail. I ought to have had more sense than ter have started on sich a fool trip; there 'sn't much fun in running away with a murderer, anyhow. What do you think about it?"

Mark did not reply; he was just then debating with himself how he should manage to extricate himself from this new difficulty.

One thing—he was resolved never to be returned to the jail alive, either by Sally or her father, but just how he would be able to avoid this possible alternative he could not, for the life of him, say.

It was a wild, almost uninhabited stretch of country through which they were passing now, and Mark thought that, watching his opportunity, he might be able to wrest the revolver from Sally's hand, and, thus robbing her of her power to do harm, manage to escape into the wilderness.

But Sally was not to be caught napping; her eyes were upon him continually, and her hand never loosened its grasp from the revolver.

The girl did not have much to say now, neither did Mark.

They rode slowly and in silence.

By this time it was broad daylight. The sun was just appearing in the east. Birds sung in the trees by the road-side.

Every moment Mark expected to see the girl's father coming down the road.

"He'll be here afore a great while," she remarked, seeming to divine his thoughts by the expression of his face.

"I'm not anxious to see him," observed Mark, dryly.

Hardly had he said this when there was borne upon the air the distant clattering of horses' hoofs.

"Dad's a-coming," cried Sally excitedly, reining up her horse.

Mark pulled up his horse also.

They had halted on a low bridge that spanned a deep, sluggish stream, on either side of which was a heavy growth of trees and underbrush.

Mark glanced at the water quickly, and a plan of escape came into his mind in an instant.

He gave Sally a quick glance, then turned his eyes in the direction of the clattering hoof-strokes.

A moment later, round a bend in the road came a troop of mounted men.

They saw their game, and instantly gave a loud, victorious yell.

Mark waited not a moment longer, but sprung from his horse to the rail of the bridge, and leaped head-first into the water below, just as the astonished Sally whipped out her revolver, but Mark was out of sight before she could use it.

Presently his head appeared above the water some distance from the bridge.

She drew a bead at it and fired.

The bullet struck the water an inch from the target.

The latter again disappeared.

Ten seconds later Mark was pulling himself from the water a hundred yards from the bridge and out of sight of all his enemies.

Then, once on the ground, he sprung into a jungle-like thicket near by, and concealed himself among the foliage.

Here he remained for some while, his heart in his throat half the time, for he could hear his pursuers all around him, and cursing and swearing because they could not find him.

And loudest of all was the voice of Sally. She declared that she had shot him dead, and that his body was even then floating in the creek.

Her father finally thought so too, and gave orders that the stream be watched closely.

This was Mark's opportunity to get off unobserved, and he took advantage of it at once, and

was soon out of sight and hearing of his pursuers.

The boy traveled rapidly.

He did not halt until he had reached an open prairie.

Then he concluded to understand better the nature of his surroundings, and so halted to take observations.

There was a log cabin not a great distance away, near which was a small patch of growing corn and a garden of vegetables.

Mark was in doubt whether he had better approach the place or not.

What if the inmates should suspect that all was not right with him, would they not deprive him of his liberty?

He thought the matter over hurriedly, then he looked at his still dripping garments, considered how utterly miserable he was in every way, and he resolved to do something for himself at once if possible, and trust to luck to help him through.

So he walked boldly forward, passed along the edge of the cornfield, entered the vegetable garden and approached the cabin by a foot-path which led directly to the door.

There was no one in sight outside the house, and no signs of life came from within; yet the appearance of the cabin was not that of desertion, but rather that of temporary absence of whoever resided there.

Mark rapped at the door.

No one answered; no one spoke.

He rapped again, louder.

Still no reply.

Then he opened the door and went in. But the moment he had stepped inside, he started back, his face filled with surprise; for there, stretched out on a pallet in one corner of the room, was a man apparently lifeless.

It was an aged negro.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NEW CHARACTER.

THE first impulse of the boy was to retreat, when he saw the outstretched body of a man on the floor before him.

A second thought, however, convinced him that this would be foolish, and he boldly entered, and approached the apparently lifeless man.

The man was not dead, however, but only sleeping.

Mark surveyed the black face hurriedly, and was surprised to discover spots of blood upon it; then he looked closer and saw other spots of blood, on the bed-clothing, on the hands of the sleeper, and on the floor of the room.

"There has been foul work here," muttered the boy, "and this old negro is concerned in it; he must have got the worst of the trouble, by the looks of things. I wonder who he is?"

The sleeper began to show signs of waking, and presently he opened his eyes and fastened them on the intruder with a savage glare; then, quick as a flash, he reached his hand under the clothing and pulled forth a rusty revolver.

Mark saw his danger at once, and with the spring of a cat was upon the man in an instant.

Seizing the revolver, he wrested it from the uplifted hand without difficulty, for, after the

first show of strength the man sunk back weak and helpless.

"What do you mean by trying to shoot me?" demanded the boy, sharply.

The man did not reply; he only groaned, and turned his face aside.

"You seem badly injured," remarked Mark, presently. "What has been the trouble?"

"What are you doing here?" asked the negro, turning suddenly.

"I only happened in," replied Mark, quietly; "I am doing nothing."

During the short silence which followed, the negro surveyed the boy from head to foot.

"I reckon I'se mistaken," he muttered; "dis ain't der feller. I say, yo' boy, who are yer?"

"Nobody in particular," was the answer; "call me a cowboy, if you wish."

"Den yo' don't belong to Dick Belmont's gang?"

"No; who said I did? I don't look like a cut-throat, do I?"

"Don't know 'bout dat," returned the negro; "yo' look powerful hard. Whar yo' kim from?"

"Nebraska."

"Whar yo' going?"

"Texas."

"Through the nation?"

"Yes. Don't ask me any more questions until I have asked you a few. Why are you all covered with blood?"

The negro groaned and closed his eyes as if in pain.

"You have had a fight with somebody," continued the boy, "and seem to be badly hurt. Where are your injuries?"

"All over me," assured the negro, feebly.

"Kind o' pounded all up?"

"Jes' so. They didn't give me half a chance or I'd 'a' killed some ob 'em."

"Some of them?"

"Yes—Dick Belmont an' two odder fellows. Oh, I knows 'em."

"Has Dick Belmont been here, lately?" questioned Mark, hurriedly.

"I don't know how lately he's been yar, for p'raps I've been jes' as good as dead these two days or more. Dey kim yer, de rascals, an' kase I wouldn't gib 'em all I hed, dey knocked me down an' pounded me with a club until I didn't know anything; den de rascals take what dey want an' skip out. When I kim to I find myself on de floor covered with blood; den I crawl inter bed an' lie yer more dead dan alive fo' I don't know how long. Lordy gosh! but it was awful!"

"Are you able to help yourself?" asked Mark, sympathizingly.

"Can't hardly move; I'se jes' as sore as a bile all ober me."

"Maybe I can do something to help you."

"I don't know; maybe yo' kin; I'se awful hungry."

Mark glanced around the room. The suggestion of hunger made by the negro brought to mind the pressing fact that the boy was very hungry himself.

"What can I get you to eat?" he asked. "All I want is plenty of raw material, and the rest

will come easy enough. Have ye any bacon or flour?"

"I reckon so," groaned the negro. "Jes' scratch aroun' an' find what yo' kin; don' ax me 'bout anything, fer I'se awful sick."

Mark did not wait for any further invitation. He resolved at once to do all he could for the negro, which at the same time would be doing something for himself.

So he bustled about the house; administered to the comfort of the wounded man as best he could; prepared something to eat for the half-famished fellow, of which he also partook; brought fresh water from the spring and removed the blood-spots from the floor, and, in short, put the house in perfect order.

From this moment the wounded negro seemed to improve.

He was not badly injured; no bones were broken; he was only severely bruised about his head and face.

By the following morning he was able to sit up, and Mark helped him into a chair, where he seemed to rest comfortably.

Then he told again the story of his fight with Dick Belmont, and how that worthy had, with the help of others, pounded him until he was unconscious.

"Then he left you for dead, I suppose?" said Mark, inquiringly.

"Yes, he didn't reckon I'd ebber come ter life ag'in."

"When he left you, where did he go?" asked Mark.

"I don't know; reckon he went home. Dere was a hul gang ob 'em, an' de boss was Dick Belmont."

Mark changed the subject by asking the old negro for a history of himself, personally.

"Who are you? Where do you come from? What are you doing here?"

"I kim yer to get out ob de way ob ebbry-body else," was the reply; "I don't do much ob anything but hunt an' fish; I raise a little corn and a few 'taters; my name is George Washington Horn."

Mark started.

"Where did you come from here?" he asked.

"Ole Kentuck'."

"What part of Kentucky?"

"Near Tompkinsville."

"Did you know the Ludingtons?"

"I should reckon I did."

"Mark Ludington?"

"I see'd him las' when he war a toddler—long while ago. What fo' yo' ax me 'bout de Ludingtons? What do yo' know 'bout de Ludingtons?"

"A good deal; I am one of 'em; I am Mark Ludington!"

CHAPTER XV.

A BLACK MAN'S FRIENDSHIP.

THE old negro stared in amazement when Mark announced his identity.

"You Mark Ludington?" he cried. "Why, I can't make myself believe it. Whar did yo' kim from, boy? I habbent see'd yo' since yo' war a toddler. I know'd yer fadder well, an' know'd yer mudder. I use ter work fo' de ole

man years ago. I hearn dat somebody killed him."

"Yes," replied Mark quietly.

"An' killed yer mudder, too."

"Yes."

"And den burn de house."

"Yes—only too true."

"You must hab been a large boy den, fo' it war seberal years after I see'd yo' las'?"

"I was twelve years old then. I was away from home at the time, else I would have been killed too. It was horrible. The house was surrounded in the night by a lot of desperate men; my father was called to the door and shot down in cold blood; then the wretches murdered my mother and set fire to the house. Their only excuse for the butchery was that my father, who was a judge in that district, had sentenced to prison for life a notorious scoundrel who was a friend of the gang who afterward murdered both my parents. An effort was made to capture the murderers, but they escaped to parts unknown; and soon the effort was abandoned."

"An' dere wasn't anybody lef' but you," said the negro, solemnly; "dere wasn't anybody to take care ob ye?"

"I was all alone," replied the boy; "but I was old enough to take care of myself. I had only one thing to live for after that! I would track the scoundrels down and wreak a bloody vengeance on them all. So I learned their names—learned all about them; made the character of each a study; and from that time on I have been searching for them. Do you think the search has been a failure?"

"Lordy! lordy! I can't tell nuffin' 'bout it," said the negro. "I don't know."

"Well, it has not; I have found them; I know where they are; I am on their track. Would you like to know the name of the leader of the gang?"

"Deed I would. Hab I ebber see'd him?"

"Yes, often; you know him much better than I do. His name—"

He stopped speaking suddenly, for, glancing through the open door, his quick eye caught sight of several mounted men coming toward the house, among whom was the sheriff of Ford county, father of that remarkable girl, Sally.

Mark thought it was all up with him then. He could not escape through the door, for that would be to show himself to his enemies, who were now within a dozen yards of the house.

In a few words the boy explained the situation to his companion, and urged him to show him some way of escape.

"For heaven's sake! don't let them take me!" he cried; "I'd rather die than to fall into the hands of that bloodthirsty crowd. Conceal me somewhere."

The old negro pointed to an empty barrel standing in one corner of the room, and hurriedly told the boy to jump into it.

"Quick! quick! or dey'll cotch ye," he said; "jump inter de bar'l ter onst."

Mark did as directed, without a moment's delay, and the African covered him over with a strip of old carpet, and admonished him to keep very quiet and he would get rid of the visitors as quickly as he could.

Presently there was a loud thumping at the door, followed by a burst of sunlight, and the next moment Sheriff Jones and several men pushed their way into the room.

The negro greeted them kindly, and asked them what he could do for them that morning.

"Can't do much of anything, I reckon," replied the sheriff. "Ye haven't see'd any strangers about these diggin's lately?—a young feller pretty well bunged up, hungry and tired like?"

"No sich feller's been along yere dat I knows ob," answered the African; "I habben't see'd any boy."

"What's the matter with ye, old man?" said the sheriff, suddenly; "what makes ye look so 'tarnal ghostly! I've see'd lots of dead niggers in my day, and you look jist like one of them! What ails ye?"

"I got a bad thumpin' t'other day," replied the negro.

"Got a bad thumping? Who thumped ye?"

"Dick Belmont?"

"So Dick's been round yer lately, has he?"

"Yes, an' I tole you, he mighty nigh killed me dis time fo' sho'."

"Was there anybody with him?"

"Yes, several fellers."

"Was there a young chap among 'em, a kind o' pert-lookin' boy?"

It came into the African's head that a first-class falsehood would be a good thing at that moment, so he replied:

"Let me 'flect a leetle; 'pears ter me dere was a boy in dat gang; yes, dat's a mighty fac', dere was jist sich a boy as you 'scribe. I remember now, de little cuss looked as dough he had jist kim up from de bottom ob de creek."

"Dripping with water, wasn't he?" asked the sheriff, excitedly.

"Yes, dat's what's de matter; an' he was de berry hardest-lookin' cub I ebber see'd afore in all my life."

"Did he go off with the rest of the gang?"

"I reckon he did; he seemed to be on mighty good terms with Dick Belmont."

"I told you so," declared the sheriff, turning to his men; "these rascals all run together. Dick Belmont is the leader of the gang, and this boy is one of 'em. I knew by the looks of the young rascal that he was a mighty hard case, and I am not surprised to know that he is one of Dick Belmont's crowd. Lord! but I wish I could lay hands on him; I wouldn't fool with him long, I tell ye. I say, old man, you are sure he went away with Dick Belmont?"

"I am dat; mighty sure."

"Well, then, we may as well return home," observed the sheriff to his companions; "it won't do to follow them now; we are not strong enough to fight Dick in his own home. But I'll tell you what we will do; in a few days a lot of us will get together and go down thar and clean him out root and branch. We kin do it; we kin kill every one of 'em, and that's jist what we'll do."

They left the house at once, mounted their horses and rode away.

Then Mark came out of his hiding-place and breathed a sigh of relief.

"That was a close call," he said, "and no

mistake. What a bloodthirsty crowd they were! Had they caught me, I really believe they would have murdered me on the spot!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A DANGEROUS JOURNEY.

"DEY might have cotched yo' easy 'nuff, ef dey had on'y looked in de bar'l," remarked the African, well pleased with the success of his undertaking. "Wasn't dat a mighty big lie dat I tole 'em?"

"Yes, that was a good one," answered Mark; "you made them think that I was a natural-born robber. Well, it don't matter; I'd as soon have them think that as anything else. It was a close shave I had, though, sure enough. Seems to me I'd better get out of here right away."

"It don't 'pear to be werry safe fo' ye in dis locality," observed the negro. "But whar kin yo' go to be any safer?"

"I don't know," replied Mark, slowly; "probably nowhere. But there is no reason why I should remain here. I have about made up my mind to try and find Dick Belmont."

The African looked surprised.

"Golly mighty!" exclaimed he; "what fo' you want to see Dick Belmont? Don't yo' know dat he'll murder ye on de spot? Now I tole ye, boy, better keep away from de rascal Belmont, fo' he's de baddest man in dis part ob de country. I knows him, I do, an' I tole ye fo' yer own good; Dick is a werry bad man."

"But suppose everybody else is against me but Dick, what then?"

"Dere's whar ye make a mistake, boy," answered the old man; "everybody ain't ag'in' ye. The trouble all kin from your getting inter bad company. Jes' as long as yo' 'sociate with sich fellers as Dick Belmont, jes' dat 'ere long will ye be 'cused ob doin' jes' as he does—robbin' an' stealin'. Take de advise ob an ole man, an' keep 'way from Dick Belmont."

Mark knew that the old negro was right in what he had said, but for all that the boy was determined to renew the acquaintance of the outlaw Belmont, and to that end was preparing to start at once in search of him.

"I'll return in a few days or weeks," he said, "and you will then know why it is I so much desire to meet the rascal in his own home."

The negro fitted Mark out with a blanket, a leathern pouch well filled with food, a rusty pistol—the only one in the house—plenty of ammunition, and an ancient-looking mule, the only four-legged quadruped on the premises.

"Yo' mought jis' as well hab de hul outfit as not," he said, "fo' I'll nebber hab 'casion to use 'em again. In fac', I'se powerful glad ter git shed ob dat mule, I is fo' sartin' sho'. You'll git better 'quainted wid dat mule arter yo' hab had him a day or two."

"Think so?" said Mark. "What sort of a critter is he?"

"He's de best mule on dis prairie, I tole yo'," replied the African; "he's jes' like a cradle to ride, an' as swift as lightning. I tole yo', boy, he's de daisy mule, an' no mistake."

"Then what's the matter with him?" asked Mark.

"Dere ain't anyt'ing de matter wid de mule," replied the African.

"But you insinuated something of the kind," insisted Mark.

"Not about de mule, but de mule's hind legs—dey will fly up."

"Oh! he's a kicker."

"He's de wuss kicker I eber see'd in all my life. Dere don't anybody dare git in his rear, fo' he'll back right up on 'em an' kick dere daylight out. Bear dat in mind, young feller, an' ef you've got an enemy dat ye want ter get rid ob, bring dis mule to bear on him and he's a gone sucker, and no mistake."

"Maybe I shall be able to make use of him in that way," said Mark, reflectively; "depend upon it, I'll not get in range of his heels myself, I'll leave that for some other feller to do. You say he is a lightning runner?"

"Bet yer life he is, boss."

"Then he suits me first-class," observed Mark, "and I'm much obliged to you for the loan of him. Good-by."

The young man was not long in putting himself out of sight of the cabin of his negro friend.

He traveled rapidly, for he was anxious to reach the home of the outlaws, where he thought he would at least be safe from capture by the authorities of Ford county, who, no doubt, were still in search of him.

Mark had a slight knowledge of the country through which he was passing, for he had been there before, but he did not know the exact locality of the robbers' retreat, which was somewhere in the Indian Territory.

He was confident, however, that he could find it, and he believed moreover that it would be safe for him to boldly face the band, inasmuch as he was on terms of friendship with its leader.

So he hurried along, feeling very hopeful of the result of his mission.

He found the mule a very docile animal, to all appearances, very swift of foot and kind of disposition; he also found that his negro friend had supplied him with food enough to last him several days.

The first, second and third nights of his journey Mark slept on the ground; the fourth night he came upon an empty cabin, which he appropriated for both himself and mule, and the fifth night found him an inmate of an Indian tent, for he had now reached the heart of the Indian Territory, where friendly Indians were quite numerous.

The owner of the tent was an Indian hunter, who lived alone some distance from the Indian settlement.

He was a middle-aged man, a pure-blood Indian; cunning, crafty, deceitful and dangerous.

He seemed very well acquainted with all parts of the Nation, and for that reason Mark concluded to remain with him over night and cultivate his acquaintance.

No doubt the fellow knew something about Dick Belmont and his gang, and could direct the boy to the den of the outlaws. At any rate, Mark concluded to interview the man on the subject, and to that end would remain with him over night.

So he tied his mule to a stake driven deep in the ground, gave him a little hay to eat, and

then, with the Indian, sought the tent, for by that time it was long after dark.

Then he began to quiz the red-skin in regard to his knowledge of Dick Belmont, and soon had all the information he desired. He learned that the robber band was composed of about a dozen men; that they occupied a ranch in the center of an unbroken wilderness a short distance only east of the Texas cattle-trail; that Dick Belmont was even then at home, for he had passed the abode of the Indian only a few days previous.

"I'll get there in time for supper to-morrow night," said Mark, to himself, reflectively; "but, as for the supper, that will depend upon how glad they are to see me."

Without a thought of danger, he wrapped himself in his blanket, lay down upon the floor and went to sleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MULE PLAYS AN IMPORTANT PART.

WHEN Mark awoke the next morning he found himself alone in the tent. The Indian hunter was gone.

The boy had not seen or heard him leave the tent, and it was a mystery to him how he could have gotten out unobserved.

But, anyhow, he was gone.

"Like as not the rascal will get me into some sort of trouble yet," thought the young avenger; "I didn't like the looks of him from the first. One thing, these so-called friendly Indians are all great thieves, and it may be that this chap's idea has been to rob me. Well, he can't get much, that's certain—nothing of value but the mule."

It occurred to Mark at that moment that he would very much dislike to lose the mule, and fearing that it had really been stolen, he hurried out to see what had become of it.

Standing by the door of the tent, he saw that the mule was still there where he had tied it, looking as docile as ever, munching the hay and fighting the flies with its short, bristly tail.

"He didn't steal my mule, anyhow," observed the boy, as he approached the apparently docile animal. "Heavens! what have we here?"

He was startled at seeing stretched out upon the ground near where the mule was feeding the figure of a man.

Mark recognized the figure at once.

It was that of the Indian hunter!

He lay with his face to the ground, and his body curled up as if in pain.

He was stone dead.

Mark knew at once how and why he had died.

He had been kicked to death by the mule!

The latter had evidently been approached from behind, in the night, and had let out his hind feet with the result as above.

"He wanted to steal the critter, I reckon, inferred the boy; "served him right; no decent man would steal a mule. My old black friend said he was some on the kick, but I didn't suppose he was quite so much of a battering-ram.

He's a good-enough sort of a mule for me dead sure!"

Mark had no reason for remaining longer in that vicinity, so he mounted his mule and rode away.

"I might have buried the Indian," he thought, "but it don't matter much, anyway, about the next thing I hear will be that I killed him, and like as not all the red-skins in the nation will be looking for me inside of a week. Well, let them look."

He had not gone far when he came suddenly in sight of a camp, which proved on closer investigation to be that of the sheriff of Ford county, who, with a dozen mounted men, was on his way to the lonely retreat of Dick Belmont.

From behind a long strip of bushes, Mark surveyed the camp with mingled feelings of fear and curiosity.

His belief was that the sheriff meant business this time, and would certainly give the outlaws dire trouble. He had returned quickly with his men, and was now ready to give the robbers a desperate fight.

Mark was in more fear of the sheriff than he was of Dick Belmont; in fact, the latter had saved his life once, while the former was only too anxious to take it, and would certainly shoot him down at the first opportunity.

The first impulse of the boy was to avoid both the robbers and the sheriff's crowd; but thinking deeper, and still chafing over the ill-treatment he had received while a prisoner in the Ford county jail, he concluded to have a little revenge, and to that end, determined to hasten to the abode of the outlaws, and inform the leader of the band of the approaching danger.

Before going, however, he took a good look at the men who composed the sheriff's posse, and noted with some little surprise, that one of the number, a short, thick-set man, with a dark, frowning face, he had seen in company with Dick Belmont some weeks before in a homesteader's cabin on the prairie.

"I surely am not mistaken in the man," he said; "but why, being a friend of Dick Belmont, is he here in the company and on friendly terms with these men? There is treachery in the air, I fear."

Watching the man closely for some minutes, Mark came to the conclusion that he was acting the part of guide for the "minions of the law," and was, in truth, the Benedict Arnold of the robber band.

The boy had tied his mule to a shrub some distance from the camp of the sheriff's posse, and protected by a long strip of bushes that bordered the ravine at the head of which the camp was located, had crawled up to within easy sight and hearing of the band, and so had formed a good idea of its strength, purpose, and the nature of its movements against the outlaws. Having gained this knowledge, Mark returned to his mule, mounted the faithful animal at once, and rode away.

He was no longer in doubt what to do. He would hasten to the camp of the outlaws, and inform Dick Belmont of his danger!

He was not long in reaching the camp of the energetic sheriff of Ford county.

"I'm mighty glad any of 'em didn't see me," observed Mark; "it would have been all up with me if they had. As it looks now, it is not particularly safe for me anywhere."

Mark was in the saddle nearly the entire day; he rode rapidly, and although he did not know the exact location of the outlaws' abode, he succeeded in reaching it about nightfall, having gone only a few miles out of his way.

A log cabin in the center of a field of corn, with heavy timbers on all sides, only a short distance away, stables and other outbuildings, a well-beaten path running down to a spring, a deep ravine on one side of the house—these are some of the things which attracted the boy's attention just as the sun was going down that day.

"This must be the place," he concluded; "although I am not certain of it by any means. I'll find out, however, by rapping at the door."

Dismounting, he rapped boldly at the door, which was opened at once by a gray-haired old man, the very opposite in appearance from a robber or other outlaw.

The old man was the only person in the house.

He invited Mark in, and, closing the door, asked him what he would have.

"Nothing in particular," replied the boy quickly; "I am in search of a friend."

"A friend?"

"Yes; perhaps you know him and will show me the way to his ranch; I'd like to get there to-night. The name of my friend is Dick Belmont."

The old man burst into a hearty laugh.

"Don't you know me?" he said; "can't ye tell who I am?"

Mark recognized the voice at once.

The gray-haired old man was Dick Belmont in disguise!

CHAPTER XVIII.

AMONG THE OUTLAWS.

"DIDN'T recognize me in this rig, did you, Plucky?" remarked the robber chief, still laughing.

"I didn't, for a fact," replied Mark, who, although somewhat astonished at the sudden transformation of the man, was wise enough not to show it.

"I haven't see'd ye for several weeks," went on the outlaw; "where have you been all this time, Mister Joe?"

"Just roaming around," replied the boy, indifferently. "I don't stay in one place very long, I tell ye. Did you ever expect to see me again?"

"Wal, no—and then ag'in, yes. I kind o' reckoned you'd show up after a while—that is, if ye wasn't dead. I thought perhaps the feller's had killed ye, after I skipped out that day. You remember?"

"Bet I do!" said Mark; "wasn't I there at the time? You killed one of the chaps dead, and the others thought to have revenge on me, but I was too spry for them; I got away."

"Had to do a little shooting, Plucky?"

"No; came very near shooting one of them, though; just jumped on my horse and scampered away at full speed."

"Did they foller ye?"

"No—not any great distance."

"And you've been ever since that time coming here?"

"Not much, I haven't!" returned the boy emphatically; "I've had a mighty hard time of it, the past six weeks."

"Yes? What's been the trouble?"

"I was arrested for murder," replied Mark, "and have only just escaped from jail. An old feller by the name of Simington was found dead in his bed, his throat cut—"

Dick Belmont interrupted the boy with a laugh.

"That's the best thing I've heard of for a long time," he declared; "why, I killed old Simington, *myself*. And it was a bad job, too; there wasn't any money to speak of. So you got picked up fer it, did ye, Plucky?"

"Yes; I was in the Ford county jail, several weeks."

"How did ye get out?"

Mark told the story of his escape; how he had worked on the romantic nature of the sheriff's daughter; how she had planned to elope with him; how they had crept noiselessly from the jail in the dead of night; how they had dashed away, going at full speed until morning, and then how he had escaped from the girl who, tiring of the romantic flight, wished to return and take Mark with her; he told the story in detail, but said nothing of his meeting with the aged negro or what else occurred subsequent to his escape from the girl by jumping into the water as recorded in another chapter.

"You've been through the mill, for a fact," averred the outlaw; "and I don't wonder that you feel kind o' sore toward everybody. What are you goin' to do now?"

"I don't know," replied the boy.

"Isn't it about time that you got back at these fellers in some way?" observed Dick Belmont, quietly.

"How?"

"Why, they don't appear to love you, *very* much, so what's the use of you loving them? My motto is to slap back; give people the same sort of treatment they give you. If it hadn't been for me, they'd burned you at the stake; and if it hadn't been for Sally, just about now they'd be gitting ready to hang you. Now, in my opinion, the best you can do is to retaliate. You are about as bad off as I am now; you don't dare live an honest life, for, first you know, you'll be picked up for some murder, and then what will become of ye? Plucky, you are in hard luck, for a fact."

Mark acknowledged as much and asked what he should do about it.

"Turn robber, murderer, outlaw—do as you please; get a few friends around you and make it hot for everybody else," replied Dick Belmont; "that is the way I do, and don't I succeed pretty well?"

"You are a good one, Dick," said the boy, familiarly; "I wish I was half as smart as you are. But it seems to me you are a little careless about the way you live?"

"How careless?"

"Your enemies might surprise you; but then you certainly do not live here all alone?"

"Oh, no; this is only an outlook post; there are other cabins. When I am here alone, I disguise myself as an old hermit; but I don't stay here much of the time. Do you see those hills over thar?"

Mark glanced out of the window.

"Yes, I see them," he said.

"Well, our main stronghold is thar. Most of the fellers are over thar now, I reckon. You see, I ain't 'feard to tell you this because you are in the same boat with us, and I wouldn't wonder if you'd join the gang, if I would ask you, Plucky, eh?"

"Why don't you ask me, then?"

"Would you really like to join us?" inquired the outlaw.

"For a while, I would," returned Mark.

"And you'll do your part of the work?"

"Certainly."

"Then it's a bargain; and you are a mighty sensible boy, and I tell you why:—In the first place, it's the best thing you could do, and in the next place if you hadn't 'a' joined us it would be my duty to put you out of the way!"

"Not kill me?"

"Yes, kill ye. No stranger ever leaves this place alive. It wouldn't do for fellers to come here and then go 'way and tell all about what they had seen. How do I know that you wouldn't come back inside of a week with a gang of men, and what would be the result? Why, like as not the hull of us would get killed. No; we don't take chances on anybody, and it's only because I have see'd you afore, and know you, Plucky, that I am willing to have you go in with us."

"Are you sure there are no traitors in your band?"

Dick Belmont gave Mark a startled look, and the latter returned it with interest.

"What do you mean?" demanded the outlaw, sharply.

Before Mark could reply the door opened and in stepped a man, none other than the one whom the boy had seen and noted particularly that morning with the sheriff's posse.

The new-comer greeted Dick Belmont with a shake of the hand, and gave Mark a scrutinizing look, then he fell to talking about himself in a way that satisfied the boy that there was at least one traitor in the band of Dick Belmont, and that one the man who had just entered the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

TIM SHIRLEY, THE TRAITOR.

"So you have been back to old Kentuck, have ye," remarked Dick Belmont to the new-comer, as the latter paused a moment in his rapid talk. "Don't reckon you see'd any old landmarks?"

"Not many," was the reply; "I didn't stay long; it wasn't healthy fer me there. I find that I'm safer here than anywhere else. Where are the rest of the boys, Dick?"

"Part of 'em are away somewhere, I don't know where; the rest are over yonder among the hills. I've been mostly alone yer to-day un-

til jist now, when this young feller brought up. You don't know him, I reckon?"

"No—never see'd him afore."

"Well, he's a distant relative of Bill Jones, the sheriff of Ford county," observed Belmont, with a laugh. "He never told me so, but I thought it must be so, seeing as how he's been living with the sheriff for several weeks. In fact, when he left the ranch Bill liked him so well that he follered him half-way here. He's a good one, is this kid."

There was more talk of the same kind, and then Mark boldly asked the new-comer his name.

"Tim Shirley," was the reply.

Mark struggled hard to conceal a look of surprise. Again he spoke.

"You are from Kentucky, you say?"

"Yes."

"Where in Kentucky?"

The man looked annoyed. He said:

"What do you want to know for, young man? What business is it of yours? Durned if it don't strike me as how you are 'tarnal impudent."

"Take it as you please," returned Mark, coolly; "I don't ask anything of you."

"Nor I of you, young chap, so keep a civil tongue in your head; that is my advice. Do you hear?"

"I hear, but I don't intend to heed," assured Mark. "I'll say what I please, and don't you forget it!"

"Keep yer tongue still!" roared the man.

"Oh, don't," said Mark, mockingly.

"I have a notion to shoot you full of holes, you impudent little skunk! What business have you here, anyhow?"

"I live here," replied Mark; "this is my home, and if you think I am a coward, just try me on, open hostilities with your little gun, or pitch into me with a knife, and see how the thing will pan out. Let me give you warning right here, Tim Shirley. I don't fancy your style, and first you know I'll put you so full of holes you won't know yerself. Mind what I say, and be mighty careful how you talk."

There would have been a fight then and there had not Dick Belmont interfered at that moment, and the only reason he did so was to question Mark more fully as to what he knew of treason in connection with the robber band.

"No fighting here," he said in a commanding voice; "put up your guns, and behave yourselves. Do you hear?"

"I'll have your heart yet," growled Tim Shirley, reluctantly returning his pistol to his belt.

"All I ask is a fair fight," assured Mark, coolly. "I'm not in the least afraid of you."

"Come, Tim," put in Dick Belmont, "go and find the rest of the boys, and I'll look after this kid. Some other time if you two want to fight, why just pitch right in. At present, let's have peace."

"I'll fix him, I'll fix him," growled the enraged man, as he started for the door; "let me alone for that. Oh, the miserable little skunk!"

He went away swearing savagely to himself, and soon again Mark and Dick Belmont were alone.

"You said something about a traitor in the ranks," remarked the robber chief, hurriedly; "what did ye mean, boy?"

"Just what I said; there is a traitor in the band."

"Where is he? Who is he?" hissed the outlaw. "It will be well for you to make your words good. Tell me the name of the traitor!"

"Tim Shirley!" answered Mark, stoutly.

"Can you prove it, Plucky?"

"I can. Even now there is a crowd of fellows on the way to capture you, and Tim Shirley is guiding them here. Early this morning I saw him with them—they were heading this way, and all were well armed. I lay in the bushes and watched them closely, and Shirley was there with the rest, as big a gun as any of them. For that reason I am here; I came to warn you. What do you think now of Tim Shirley?"

The robber chief was silent. He was thinking deeply. Presently he spoke:

"I believe you are telling me the truth. Who is the leader of this crowd of robber-killers?"

"Bill Jones, the sheriff of Ford county, Kansas. I know the rascal well."

"How many are there of 'em?"

"Something like a dozen; it's a bad crowd. How many men have you?"

"The boys are not all here. I reckon about ten men ar' all I could scare up at present. Plucky, if I was dead sure Tim Shirley was a traitor I'd go this minute and murder him in cold blood. You hear me? Tim Shirley could not live another hour if I *knowed* fer sure he was a traitor."

"Watch him—that's all I've got to say," returned Mark. "But, one thing: look out for yourself!"

"And you—"

"I'll do the scouting for the crowd; I'll be present in the fight, sure as a gun! I have given you warning; now do as you please. For my part, I'll never be taken alive by such a scoundrel as the sheriff of Ford county!"

Mark was about to go when his eye caught sight of what seemed to be a photograph among a collection of articles on a rude table in one corner of the room. He picked it up carelessly and glanced it over. It was the photograph of six rough-looking men, sitting in a group, with Dick Belmont as the center figure. It was an old picture apparently, somewhat crumpled and torn, and very badly soiled. Besides Dick Belmont there was another man whom Mark recognized—none other than Tim Shirley.

"I do not know the others," said the boy, speaking to the outlaw.

"Ned Wilber, Jack Leighton, Hank Wilson, and Sam Collins," replied the outlaw, slowly.

Mark's eyes glittered, but the robber chief was looking in another direction, and did not see the change in the young avenger's face.

"Are they all here?" asked Mark, quietly.

"Yes, all of 'em."

A sudden suspicion entered Dick's mind at this moment, and he turned quickly.

"Why do you ask, Plucky? What are these men to you?" he demanded.

"I know them," answered Mark sternly, moving toward the door; "they are the ones

who murdered Judge Ladington, of Kentucky—butchered his poor wife and burned his house. Glad to know they are all here. Good day!"

For the first time in his life Dick Belmont was at a loss to know what to say or do, and when he had recovered his wonted composure the lad was gone!

CHAPTER XX.

TREADING ON DANGEROUS GROUNDS.

THE sheriff's posse, guided by Tim Shirley, reached the vicinity of the outlaws' home late in the afternoon.

It had been arranged that a halt should be made about a mile from the outlook cabin of the robbers, in order to give the traitor Shirley a chance to investigate the fighting condition of the enemy.

"It would be a mighty good thing to steal their ammunition," Sheriff Jones had said to him; "or if you can't steal it, water it. It don't matter, only so you spoil their ability to give us much of a fight."

It was a clear case of treachery with Tim Shirley. The large rewards offered for the capture of Dick Belmont, dead or alive, was what induced him to turn traitor.

And now he had conducted a well-armed and bloodthirsty enemy almost to the very door of his former home, and had himself sneaked in to see what greater damage he could do. He did not know that his treachery had been discovered by the young man whom he had just met, and that Dick Belmont had been informed of the situation.

The latter, as soon as Mark was gone, hastened out of the house, and mounting a horse, rode rapidly to where the rest of the band were congregated.

Shirley was already there.

"What did you do with the kid?" he asked, with a sneering laugh.

"The kid is all right," replied Belmont quickly; "I only wish I could say as much for you. Tim Shirley, you are a black-hearted scoundrel!"

The traitorous villain started.

For a moment he could not speak.

The men began to gather around the two principals in what promised to develop into a bloody row.

"You are a black-hearted traitor, if ever there lived one," thundered Dick Belmont. "I have a great mind to cut out your false heart and feed it to the dogs. Say, what do you mean by such treachery?"

"Treachery?"

"Yes, treachery."

"I do not understand you. I have done nothing out of the way. What do you mean?"

"Just what I say; you are a traitor. I have discovered your black purpose, and none too soon. Boys! see this man; he has laid a plan to get us all murdered. What do you think of that?"

There was a chorus of angry exclamations, and the robber chief was asked to explain himself at once.

He did so. He repeated all that Mark had

told him, and in conclusion ordered the men to prepare to defend themselves.

"It's all a miserable lie," declared the suspected man, badly frightened. "Bill Jones isn't within a hundred miles of here. The whole thing is a trumped-up story by that beast of a boy."

Tim Shirley had been under suspicion for a long while in the robber band, and it was now decided not to allow him to escape without an investigation of his alleged treachery.

So, by order of the outlaw chief, he was securely bound and placed in a rude prison-house among the rocks.

Then the band began to make preparations to meet the enemy.

Meanwhile the latter were concealed in a clump of bushes a mile or so away, and all were eager for the fray.

Bill Jones, the sheriff of Ford county, Kansas, was particularly high-spirited.

"We've got 'em where they can't squirm now," he said, "and if Dick Belmont isn't dead by to-morrow night, why, you may just call me a sinner. We'll make mince-meat of the whole gang, and don't you forget it."

"It's about time Tim Shirley was getting back," remarked one of the men, speaking to the sheriff of Ford county.

"Should have been back an hour ago," observed the man of law; "can't understand why he don't come."

"Perhaps he's playing off on us," said the other speaker.

"I reckon not," returned the sheriff. "But I wish he'd get back, fer I want to open the ball about midnight, and it's mighty nigh midnight now. I'd give a good deal to know if that young sprig which run away with my darter Sally is among the crowd; for, if he is, I want the special privilege of killing him."

The sheriff's posse numbered twelve men. They were hardy, rough fellows, nearly as bad as the outlaws themselves in the matter of character, and equally as bloodthirsty.

Having been informed of the situation and exact location of the robbers' stronghold, they were now awaiting the return of the spy, Shirley, when they would move forward and give the enemy battle.

"If Shirley can only manage to steal the bulk of their ammunition, or water the powder, our job will be an easy one," Bill Jones had said, and it was his belief that every one of the outlaws could be killed without the attacking party losing a man.

So they waited for the return of their traitor guide, not knowing that his treachery had been discovered, and that he was even then a helpless prisoner, with the very fair certainty that he would be coolly murdered before the rising of another sun.

The night wore on.

The sheriff's posse still watched and waited. The men were becoming very uneasy. They were fearful now that Tim Shirley had betrayed them.

The latter did not put in an appearance, and he was still absent when the light of morning broke.

Then alarm seized the men, and they demand-

ed an immediate order to attack the stronghold of the outlaws, or else that they be withdrawn from the field at once.

At this moment, while Sheriff Jones was debating with himself what to do, a loud yell burst on the air, and immediately thereafter half a score of wild riders, each with a pistol in either hand, dashed into view, and, scattering out like Indians, formed a circle around the sheriff's astonished party, and whooping, howling and yelling, made straight toward them.

But Bill Jones was equal to the emergency. Instantly he commanded his men to fall flat on their faces and give the enemy the full benefit of a close-range fire, hoping to dismount them at least.

"If you can't kill a man, kill a hoss," he cried excitedly.

The wild riders came on.

Yelling, shouting, swearing—they were like so many flying demons or the impersonation of incarnate fiends.

But their fury was only a pretense. When within speaking distance of the sheriff's posse a halt was made suddenly, and the leader of the rangers rode forward a few paces and hoarsely shouted:

"I command all of ye to surrender. If ye refuse, I'll have the life's blood of every mother's son of ye inside the next ten minutes."

There was no reply.

The men on the ground held their breath and awaited the onset.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DESPERATE BATTLE.

"AIN'T ye going to surrender?" yelled Dick Belmont fiercely.

"Not as anybody knows of," returned the sheriff of Ford county savagely.

"We've got ye surrounded, ye cusses," called the outlaw chief, "and if ye don't surrender thar won't be much left of ye arter a few minutes. You hear me now? Well, it's mighty straight talk I'm a-gittin' off at this moment. The best thing ye can do is to surrender."

"Not jist at present," observed Sheriff Bill Jones. "If you want us, come and take us."

"What are ye doing here anyhow?" demanded Dick Belmont.

"Jist happened here," replied the sheriff.

"You lie. you dog: you are here to capture me; but you don't come it. Tim Shirley played you a nice trick, he did. I wouldn't give much for his hide after we get through with you. Curse the miserable traitor!"

There was a suspicious movement on the part of certain members of the sheriff's party which caused the outlaw leader to hastily retreat a few paces, when he again opened the war of words.

"I'll ask you once more; are you going to surrender?" he cried.

"Not by a darned sight," was the energetic reply of the burly sheriff.

Turning to his men Dick Belmont gave a quiet word of command, and the next moment a shout went up from those nearest him, and, riding quickly forward, they discharged their revolvers at the sheriff's party, and just as quickly turned and rode away.

Thus was the fight opened.

The outlaw band preferred to do their fighting in regular Indian style, and being mounted, while the others were on foot, they had a decided advantage in such a fight.

For more than an hour this singular and, for the time, bloodless combat continued; then, having accomplished nothing, Dick Belmont determined on more energetic measures to defeat the enemy.

The latter had now concealed themselves behind rocks and trees and in the bushes, and were watching every opportunity to put in a shot at the robbers, who, in turn, emptied their revolvers at the sheriff's posse, though without doing any damage.

Finally, Dick Belmont decided to charge the enemy from two sides, and dislodge him if possible, even at the cost of two or three of his own men.

So the order was given to dash forward, which was done with a sudden rush, the troopers yelling like fiends.

Then some bloody work was done.

The fighting was at close range now.

Each party was doing its best to subdue the other.

Curses, yells, screams and groans were general.

Shot followed shot in quick succession, bullets flew thick and fast, men and horses fell to the ground killed or wounded, and above the din of battle the savage voice of Dick Belmont could be heard urging his men forward.

It was an exciting scene.

The sheriff's posse outnumbered the robbers, but the latter were more desperate in their daring, and were more used to that sort of fighting.

In the depth of a vast wilderness, this bloody battle took place, far away from the haunts of men, and seemingly out of sight of all save the participants themselves.

But such was not the case. There was a living witness to the scene of blood, none other than the Boy Avenger, Mark. He had watched the battle from the first from an adjacent hill-top, and not a move had been made that he had not seen.

"The fellows from Ford county are getting the worst of it," he muttered, as he watched the progress of the fight. "There has been a number killed on both sides. I feel like taking a hand in it, too, but as I don't care a cent which side comes out ahead, I'll not bother myself to interfere."

The lad could see that the two leaders, Bill Jones and Dick Belmont, were yet among the living, and he also failed to observe, and this with some surprise, the presence of Tim Shirley, the traitor, on the field.

"Belmont must have killed him," he said; "and now it remains to be seen who will kill Belmont. Had he not saved my life, I'd settle the question mighty quick; I'd kill him myself. As it is, I'll see that he gets killed one of these days, and I'll never leave these prairies until all the rest of the band are dead."

At this moment there was a shout from the battle-field, and Mark saw that the sheriff's party had been overpowered and the sheriff himself and two others taken prisoners.

The ground was thickly strewn with dead. The robbers had suffered the loss of all but four of their men, and of the sheriff's posse, only three remained alive, and they were prisoners.

"Strange that they should take any prisoners," said Mark to himself, knowing the bloodthirsty disposition of Dick Belmont.

He had hardly said this when the robber chief coolly murdered the two companions of the sheriff by shooting them through the head.

It was done quickly and deliberately, and was followed with a savage threat to murder the sheriff should he offer the least provocation.

Then the four outlaws, with their prisoner, started for the robbers' retreat among the hills.

Mark still watched them closely.

It was evident from Dick Belmont's manner that he keenly felt the loss he had sustained, and evident from the behavior of Sheriff Jones that he recognized how perilous was his situation.

Mark took careful notes of the remaining robbers. Of the original five only Dick Belmont and Tim Shirley were left; the other four had been killed in this terrible battle with the officers of the law. And to complicate matters still more, the treachery of Tim Shirley had placed him in eternal enmity with Dick Belmont, who was even then thirsting for his blood.

Returning to his retreat among the hills, the robber chief sought the rocky fortress wherein he had left the traitor Shirley, securely bound.

But the bloodthirsty wretch was nowhere to be found! He had managed in some way to throw off his cords, and had battered down the door of the rocky fortress and escaped.

This discovery set the outlaw chief into a terrible rage.

"The miserable dog cannot escape me long," he cried; "I'll have his false heart on the point of my knife inside of a week. Any ordinary sort of death would be too good for such a vile wretch as Tim Shirley!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A SHERIFF'S STRATEGY.

"I RECKON you don't intend to give me much show fer life," remarked Sheriff Jones, after he had been a prisoner for some hours. "What are ye going to do with me anyhow?"

"Make a pet of ye, in course," replied Dick Belmont sneeringly. "Don't ye think ye deserve to become the pampered child of luxury, ye bloated old sinner? How would ye like to be kept in a cage like a tame canary?"

"Wouldn't like it," observed the prisoner, quietly; "I'd a good deal rather be back in Ford county. I say, old man, is there anything that would induce you to let me live?"

"How?"

"Couldn't I buy my freedom—just purchase it like?"

"I reckon you mought, that is, ef you've got plenty of tin. It'll take several thousand dollars, old man, to close a trade of that kind. Haven't got any cash with ye, have ye?"

"Got plenty of it at home."

"Plenty?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"One thousand dollars."

"Not enough. Make it five thousand and I'll let you go; otherwise you are a dead duck before morning."

"But I can't raise that much before morning," insisted the sheriff. "I'll have to send somebody to Ford county after it."

"Nonsense; there is nobody ye can send. I might go after it myself disguised as a priest. How would that do?"

"First rate. I have five thousand dollars in a leathern pouch stowed away in the treasure-vault of the jail. It will be easy enough for you to get it. You know my daughter Sally?"

"I have heard of her," said Belmont, eagerly. "Go on, go on."

"Well, Sally knows where the money is, she does, and she will give it to ye; only tell her I sent ye. I'll write her a note, if ye say so."

"That will be better," said the robber chief. "Shall I bring the gal back with me?"

"No, jist tell her how I am fixed, and get the money. I'd like to have ye hurry right back. Better start at once."

The sheriff wrote a card to Sally, telling her how he was situated, and requesting her to find the bag of gold which he had secreted in the treasure-vault of the jail and turn it over to the bearer of the note, who would return with the money and purchase for him his liberty.

Dick Belmont seemed much pleased with the prospect of receiving so large a sum of money. He determined to disguise himself as a priest and start at once for Ford county. He believed that the old sheriff was telling him the truth when he said that he had five thousand dollars secreted in the jail.

"I'll be back inside of a week," he said, the next morning, when he started off. "Meanwhile, watch the cuss close, and ef he tries to escape kill him on the spot. Jist look at me, ain't I a daisy priest?"

Some one from a thicket hard by answered him, but not loud enough for him to hear. The voice said mockingly:

"Yes, you are a daisy priest, and no mistake; and I'm the boy that will keep close watch on you."

The speaker was our young friend Mark.

"I've been listening to your little confab, Mr. Belmont, and I know the trick you are going to play. What do you care for the rest of these fellows? Your idea is to get the five thousand dollars, and then skip. But I don't believe that yarn of Bill Jones; he hasn't as much as five dollars saved up, let alone five thousand. It's all a trick to get a stay of execution. The old sheriff hopes to get a chance to escape before Dick Belmont gets back. I have half a notion to help the old rascal out myself."

The boy was right when he said that Dick Belmont would not return should he get the money, and also right when he conjectured that there was no money to get, at least none belonging to Sheriff Bill Jones.

"I'm not very much in love with the Jones family," mused the lad, "else I'd help the old man escape; as it is, I reckon I'd better follow Dick Belmont."

With this purpose in view he started off at once.

He rode rapidly in the wake of the outlaw, and several times that day came in sight of him.

He did not desire to overtake the robber chief, but merely to keep within a short distance of him, so that he could watch him closely and be on hand should the outlaw undertake any exploit of an unusual nature.

"If the rascal had not saved my life I would not let him live another day," said the boy. "Could I but save his life in like manner, or as bravely as he did mine, the debt would be paid, and then I would not hesitate to kill him. But the only thing I can do now is to watch him closely."

Dick Belmont was a tireless rider, and so swiftly did he go, and so continuous, that Mark had hard work to keep track of him.

On the way they passed the house where Bill Simington had been murdered, a crime for which Mark came near suffering death.

The boy thought over the circumstances of the case, and wondered if it would be safe for him to venture among those who no doubt still considered him the guilty party.

"I ought to disguise myself somehow," he said, "but I don't exactly know how to do it. Here is a cabin; I'll go in and see what I can find. Perhaps I can rig myself up as a priest, too. No, that wouldn't do; I look too much like a cowboy to be taken for a priest. But I'll see what's in this cabin first before going any further."

The cabin was the one in which the plot to murder old Bill Simington was concocted by Dick Belmont and three others. Mark did not recognize the place until he had dismounted from his horse and had knocked at the door. Then it came to him suddenly where he was, but it was too late to retreat now, so he put on a bold front, and awaited an answer to his summons.

A man came to the door presently and opened it cautiously, as if afraid that the intruder meant him some ill.

"What are ye 'fraid of?" demanded Mark, in a savage tone of voice.

Instantly the door opened wide, and there was presented to view an aged and decrepit negro.

It was no less a personage than Mark's old-time friend, George Washington Horn!

CHAPTER XXIII.

DICK BELMONT ON THE BACK TRAIL.

"I HADN'T any idea of seeing you here," said Mark, after the first show of astonishment had passed; "seems to me you're kind o' out of yer territory. You haven't changed your residence?"

"Sartin I hab," returned the negro; "I broke up housekeeping sebbberal days ago. I'se on my way hum now."

"Where—Kentucky?"

"Dat's it, sure as you are born; I'se goin' back to ole Kentuck."

"How long have you been here—in this house?"

"'Bout two days. Dere was a feller libbed here what got killed las' week; maybe you know him—Jack Allen. I heerd all 'bout it yesterday from a chap dat jes' kim from Ford county. Jack Allen got inter trouble with de deputy-sheriff, an' de deputy killed him; but afore he died he said something—something dat'll be ob interest to you. He said—"

"What? what?" interrupted Mark, looking eagerly into the negro's face.

"He owned up ebberything—he told all he knew; he jes' gave himself dead away. I tole you, boy, Jack Allen was a mighty bad man."

"Did he tell who it was that murdered old Bill Simington?" asked Mark.

"Didn't he, though? And dat's jes' what I was gwine to tell ye," returned the African. "He said dat it wasn't you dat killed de ole man but himself an' Dick Belmont; he tole de whole business, and said dat de law officers ought ter be 'shamed ob demselves to run you down like a prairie wolf; dat it was a put-up job to throw de crime off on you. Dat's what Jack Allen said a few minutes afore he died."

"Anything more?" asked Mark.

"I don't know ob anything," replied the negro. "I reckon it'll be safe for you to go up dar an' talk it ober yerself."

"Just what I intend to do," declared Mark. "At present I am on the trail of Dick Belmont. Perhaps you have seen him to-day?"

"No—no; golly, no, an' I don't want to see him," and the African looked comically frightened; "he ain't comin' dis way, is he?"

Mark was about to reply when there came a sharp rap at the door, which was immediately opened by a man who thrust himself in without ceremony.

Instantly Mark covered him with his revolver.

"Throw up your hands," cried the boy, in a ringing voice. "I've got the drop on you, and if you dare to make a suspicious move, I'll blow the whole top of yer head through the door. D'ye hear me? Throw up yer hands!"

The man obeyed quickly, uttering several curses the while.

"I didn't reckon to find you here," he finally said.

"Nor did I expect to meet you to-day," returned Mark. "It's good for me that I got the drop on you, Tim Shirley. Oh, I don't intend to kill you, not now—not if you behave yourself. Where are you going?"

"I don't know—anywhere; only so that I don't meet Dick Belmont. Have you seen him lately?"

"Not very lately."

"And you don't know where he is?"

"No."

Mark was half-inclined to send a ball through the fellow's brain, for he had sworn to kill him, and why not do it now as well as any other time? The villain seemed to read the boy's thoughts, for he looked frightened, and said:

"Give me a show for my life; there is no reason why you should murder me in cold blood; I have never done you any harm—never."

"You lie, you scoundrel!" exclaimed Mark, savagely. "You are one of the gang that murdered both my parents, burned their house over

their heads, and made me an orphan and a wanderer. You remember all about it—the fiendish murder of Judge Ludington, of Kentucky. What will you say when I tell you that Judge Ludington was my father!"

Tim Shirley fairly gasped for breath; then he began to beg for mercy, and proved himself as great a coward as he was a villain.

"Take away his pistol and knife," commanded Mark of the negro.

The weapons of the outlaw were taken from him at once.

"Have you a horse?" asked Mark.

"Yes," shivered the villain.

"A good one?"

"Yes."

Turning to his negro friend, Mark asked him if he did not wish to accompany him to the county-seat of Ford county, his present destination.

"Golly, yes; I don't want to stay yer," replied the negro; "I'll go with ye anywhar in de worl'."

Now was a good chance for Mark to return the negro his mule, which he did, with many thanks for its use.

"I'll take this fellow's horse, and you take the mule," he said, "and together we will make the journey."

Tim Shirley protested vigorously against this plan of the boy; but the latter had him so closely cornered that he could not help himself; so the negro mounted the mule, while Mark kept the villain covered with his revolver, and a change-about was then made, and the boy mounted the outlaw's horse under cover of the African's pistol, and immediately thereafter the two friends took their departure, leaving Tim Shirley, horseless and unarmed, swearing at them from the doorway.

"I ought to have killed the rascal," muttered the young ranger, as he glanced back at the house; "but perhaps it's just as well to let him live a while longer. I've got to take them one at a time, and Dick Belmont comes first. I wonder if the outlaw chief has got hold of that bag of gold yet? I guess not; that bag of gold business is most awfully thin; only one of Bill Jones's little jokes."

Nothing happened the rest of the day worthy of note, and by midnight Mark and his black companion had reached their destination. Dick Belmont had not been seen at any time during the day, so there was no telling where he was at that moment; he might have reached the Ford county jail some hours in advance of the young ranger, or he might not reach there before morning, or some other time the next day.

"I'll introduce myself to Sally early in the morning," said Mark, as he lay down to rest in a deserted cabin on the outskirts of the town; "and I wouldn't wonder if the gal would be glad to see me. As for Dick Belmont—well, if he is not a prisoner before to-morrow night somebody will have blundered like a booby."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MARK HAS A TALK WITH SALLY.

SALLY JONES was much surprised the next morning to see a young man, whom she at once

recognized as the escaped boy prisoner Mark, ascending the steps of the jail.

She opened the door at once and accosted him.

"I know you," she said, "and I'm kind o' glad to see you. It has turned out that you didn't kill Bill Simington, after all. I gave you credit for that much, at least. Well, it don't matter. But what are you back here for, anyhow?"

"I came here to see you, Sally," declared Mark—"to see you about your father; I reckon he's in a mighty tight box."

"Somebody going to kill him?" queried Sally, meekly.

"I reckon so; has Dick Belmont been here this morning?"

"Lord, no!"

"Has anybody been here?"

"Yes—a dirty-looking priest."

"What did he want?"

"Wanted to ask me about dad. Oh, he was a lying old duffer. I sent him about his business in a hurry; I threatened to kick him into the middle of next week."

"What did he have to say, Sally?"

"Said he came from dad, and that dad told him to get a bag of gold which was concealed in the house, and I don't know what else he didn't say. Anyway, when I told him he was an old sneak and that there wasn't two dollars in the house, he began to swear like a pirate, and finally vacated the ranch."

"Where is he now?" asked Mark, eagerly; "tell me where he is?"

"About town somewhere," assured the sheriff's plucky daughter. "He has not been gone long from here. What do you want to see him for, kid?"

"He's the chap I'm looking for, returned the boy, energetically. "Sally, can you keep a secret?"

"For a little while I can. What is it?"

"The dirty-looking priest you have been telling me about is none other than Dick Belmont, the outlaw. I know it; I have followed him from the Indian Nation. I know what I am talking about. Your father sent him here on a fool's errand, and hopes to escape in his absence. The bag of gold I knew was a humbug. Sally, we must take the rascal prisoner."

"Must we? How?"

"Find out where he is; go and see him; give him a hint to follow you—he will do it; lead him into the jail, if possible; tell him any yarn so that you get him here, and the rest will be easy enough; three or four of us will be here to take him. Will you do it?"

"You bet!"

"When—at once?"

"Yes, at once."

"But first tell me, have you heard anything of your father?"

"Nothing, only that there was a big fight. A company of fellows started from here two days ago to help dad lick the outlaws."

"How many were there of them?"

"About a dozen."

"Good! Then I shall not have to do anything in that direction. All I need do is to look after the outlaw chief. I'll leave you now.

Sally. Better go at once and see if you can get the rascal to follow you back. Where is the other fellow—the deputy-sheriff? I want some help in this matter."

Sally called one of the jail attendants and the latter made search for the deputy.

He was discovered in a gambling-dive not far away playing cards with a man from Texas.

He gave up the game reluctantly, but displayed more cheerfulness when told what was wanted of him, and became really excited when Mark divulged a few of his own secrets and recounted the story of his long pursuit of the border outlaw.

"I have had plenty of chances to kill him," announced the lad in conclusion, "but somehow I didn't like to do it."

"Thunder! I'd 'a' killed him quick," declared the deputy-sheriff savagely. "Why didn't ye do it? Maybe you'd rather see the cuss hang?"

"That's it," admitted Mark; "Dick Belmont has no right to die with his boots on. I want to see the fellow stretch hemp. Would you believe it, once this same villain saved my life!"

Sally appeared from an inner room at this moment, attired for the street.

"I'll have the rascal back here in less than half an hour," she cried, and walked on.

The officer and Mark secreted themselves in a room that commanded a good view of the main walk leading to the door of the jail.

They did not have long to wait.

In a very short time Sally was seen coming at a distance closely followed by a person who had the appearance of a priest.

Presently the man was seen to hesitate, then he was heard to call on Sally to halt, which she did, and the two held a quiet conversation for a few moments.

Then they again resumed their walk toward the jail.

When within fifty yards of the building the man again hesitated.

"Why don't you come on?" cried Sally angrily.

"I haven't any business in the jail," protested the man. "Go in and get the bag of gold; I will wait for you here. Come, if you wish to save your father's life, make haste."

"And you—"

"I'll wait for you here. It ain't at all necessary for me to go in."

Sally lost control of her temper at this moment and denounced the man in loud and angry tones.

"You are a bloody rascal," she cried, "a mean, cowardly villain. You can't palm yourself off on me as a priest; I know you—bet yer life I do! You are Dick Belmont, the outlaw!"

That was enough.

The outlaw chief recognized at once that an effort had been made to entrap him, and, quick as thought, he turned to run.

Instantly Sally pulled a pistol from among the folds of her dress and blazed away at him.

He fell as if shot through the body, but quickly regained his feet and fled rapidly.

Again Sally discharged her pistol—once, twice, three times.

The outlaw continued to run, and was soon lost in the devious windings of the street.

CHAPTER XXV.

DEATH OF A TRAITOR.

"THE rascal has escaped us," declared Mark, disappointedly, as the two men made a rush for the outlaw but too late to effect his capture. "Why didn't ye kill him, Sally?"

"Didn't I shoot at him?" demanded the girl. "I reckon I did, and I think I pinked him slightly, too. He fell at the first fire."

"But he got up again mighty quick, and now where is he?"

"Don't wait a minute, but follow him," cried Sally impatiently.

They did so, Mark and the officer, but they could not see him, they could only make sure of the direction he took in his flight.

Knowing that pursuit other than on horseback would amount to nothing, Mark and his companion secured horses at once and started off at full speed.

After riding a mile or two they met a farmer who informed them that less than half an hour previous a man had gone by on horseback, riding like the wind, who was no doubt the man they were searching for.

"The fellow must have had a horse in waiting somewhere," remarked the deputy-sheriff. "Anyhow, he is mounted, and in my opinion our chances of capturing him are pretty thin."

Mark made no reply. He was determined to overhaul the outlaw if possible, and was willing to ride night and day to do it.

They went over the ground rapidly, keeping the straight road which led southward, the very one traveled by Sally and Mark the night of their singular and not unromantic elopement.

During the day frequent traces were had of the fugitive, but he was not caught sight of by his pursuers.

The latter did not halt for the night, and not until morning did they seek rest and food by the way.

And with the rising of the sun they started on, and continued their journey the rest of the day.

That night they slept on the prairie and the next morning rose early and went on.

Then came a great surprise.

Turning a bend in the road they saw coming toward them a band of mounted men.

"Are they friends or enemies?" questioned the young ranger.

"Friends, I reckon," replied his companion. "Seems to me they look kind o' natural. Thunder, yes, I know them. Bill Jones and his crowd! But where is Bill?"

The troop consisted of eight men, all rough-looking fellows, and among them was Bill Jones, the sheriff of Ford county, who had managed to escape in some manner from the outlaws.

He told his story in a few words.

"I sent Dick Belmont off on a fool's errand," he said, "and that gave me several days longer to live. The fellows watched me pretty close,

and it looked for awhile as if I wasn't going to get away at all. I got awfully blue, and began to think of Sally and wish that I was safe at home. Well, just then these boys put in an appearance and did some handsome work, for every one of the robber gang was killed in the fight. Three of our own fellers were killed, and I kin darned nigh going myself, but they didn't get me this time, for here I am safe and sound and not very much the worse for wear."

"So all of the outlaw band are dead?" said Mark interrogatively.

"Yes—all but Dick Belmont and that other feller—what is his name? Tim Shirley. Where is Dick, I wonder?"

It was now Mark's opportunity to speak of himself, which he did, telling briefly the story of his wanderings since his escape from the jail, including an account of his recent experience with Dick Belmont.

Sheriff Jones was much surprised to learn that the robber chief was somewhere in the immediate neighborhood, but he shook his head when asked by Mark if he would assist in capturing him.

"I have had enough of Dick Belmont," he said; "I reckon I'll feel safer at home jist now than anywhere else, an' thar's whar I'm going."

"Then I'll go on alone," said the boy resolutely; and he did, but first supplied himself well with food and replenished his stock of ammunition.

The day wore on.

Mark traveled very cautiously, now. He knew that the robber chief would not hesitate to shoot him at the first opportunity, and not only did he have Dick Belmont to fear, but Tim Shirley might be lying in wait for him with bloodthirsty intent.

While the young ranger was thus contemplating to himself he thought he heard voices near the roadside—an angry colloquy between two or more persons, whom he could not see for the rocks and trees that intervened.

He halted his horse and bending low in the saddle, listened intently.

The exciting colloquy continued.

A savage voice was cursing and threatening, while another voice was pleading for mercy.

Mark sprung from his horse and crept through the underbrush to get a sight of the disputants.

"You are a cowardly dog to take such an advantage of me," said one of the men. "Give me a chance for my life."

"Not much," replied the other; "I know you too well. We are very much alike, Dick Belmont neither of us know the meaning of the word mercy. I caught ye asleep; that was my luck. I relieved you of your weapons; my luck again—and now all I've got to do is to blow out your brains. Come, get ready to die; if you have any prayers, say them. I'll give ye two minutes longer to live. D'ye hear?"

Mark pushed through the underbrush.

He could see the men plainly now.

There were only two of them—deadly enemies—Dick Belmont and Tim Shirley.

The former was reclining on the ground, while standing only a few paces away was Tim Shirley, his face the picture of fiendish determination.

"Don't shoot! for Heaven's sake! don't shoot!" cried the wretched outlaw chief.

"One, two, three," cried the traitor Shirley, hoarsely. "I'll give ye not another second."

His rifle-muzzle covered the heart of the robber chief.

Instantly a sharp report sounded on the air, and Tim Shirley, not Dick Belmont, gave an agonizing cry and rolled over on the ground dead, shot through the heart!

The next moment Mark, the Boy Avenger, with smoking rifle in his hand, stepped from the bushes and confronted the man whose life he had saved.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

DICK BELMONT was amazed.

"You have saved my life," he said; "now what are you going to do with me?"

"I have a mind to kill you, too," replied Mark, savagely. "What right have you to live when all the rest of your gang are dead?"

The outlaw was silent.

The young ranger continued:

"I could have taken your life long ago, but I remembered that you had saved mine once; and now we are even—I have saved yours."

"Then you will let me go free?" asked the outlaw, rising to his feet.

A revolver flashed in his face in an instant.

"You are my prisoner," cried Mark, "and do not intend to let you escape me. Dare to make a suspicious move, and I'll blow the top of your head off. Do ye hear? What am I going to do with you? Turn you over to the officers of the law, of course! Come, we will go now."

Mark took away the outlaw's weapons and commanded him to mount his horse, which was grazing near by, and then Mark in turn mounted his own horse, and the two rode away.

It was a desperate job the Kentucky lad had undertaken—to deliver such a wretch as Dick Belmont into the hands of the law. It was necessary for him to be continually on the alert, watchful of his own life and suspicious of every movement of his prisoner.

The latter was ready to take desperate chances now; he would rather be shot and killed by the boy ranger than be hanged, as he would probably be if turned over to the officers of the law.

So the first opportunity that offered, when Mark was a little off his guard, the desperado suddenly gave a yell that startled his horse into a swift run, and before the young avenger could comprehend the situation his prisoner was several rods distant, and going like the wind.

Then Mark drew bead on him with his rifle, but the weapon missed fire.

With a cry of disappointment the boy flung the rifle to the ground and reached for his revolver.

Then ensued an exciting scene.

The desperado was yelling like a maniac, and riding like the wind; his pursuer was also shouting and swiftly riding and firing his revolver repeatedly, but without effect.

No use! The outlaw's horse was the swiftest and soon had taken its rider out of range of the young Kentuckian's fire.

Mark was terribly exasperated over this sudden turn of affairs, but he was powerless to have it otherwise.

"The rascal has escaped me, but I am not done with him yet; I'll follow him to the ends of the world."

With this determination the Boy Avenger continued the pursuit, and for several days following he trailed the outlaw closely, ran him from one county to another, until, finally, he came upon him in a most unexpected manner.

The ruffian had been joined in his flight by a cowboy desperado by the name of Matt Simmerman.

Mark came upon them suddenly in the southern part of Trego county, Kansas, and bravely, though, perhaps, foolishly, undertook to capture them, and in the fight which ensued received a bullet in his shoulder which disabled him.

The young avenger undoubtedly would have been murdered outright had not a ranchman, known as Charlie Fouts, suddenly appeared upon the scene; seeing him the desperadoes beat a quick retreat.

Badly wounded, Mark was conveyed to the ranchman's abode, where he lay for several weeks, lingering between life and death.

Meanwhile Dick Belmont and Matt Simmerman continued their journey northward.

The career of the two outlaws for the next six weeks is a matter of frontier history.

They prowled about the northern line of Kansas for some while, committing numerous depredations, and then entered Nebraska, where, in Hitchcock county, they stole several head of ponies, which they drove northward, disposing of their stolen stock on the way.

Finally they reached Minden, Kearney county, and late one afternoon, in a hotel at that place, sat down to supper in the public dining-room.

They were hardly seated when Sheriff Jack Wood, of Hitchcock county, who had trailed them for several days, entered the room and commanded them to "throw up their hands!"

Instantly the desperadoes drew their revolvers and began to shoot. Sheriff Wood received a bullet through the heart, and fell dead. Another officer who happened to be in the room was fatally shot.

The desperadoes then rushed out-doors and mounted their horses, which were tied near.

A citizen attempted to halt them; he, too, was shot down. Another citizen interfered, and received a bullet through his brain.

Then the murderers, shouting, yelling, swearing and firing their revolvers continuously, dashed out of town.

Pursuit was instigated at once, and continued several days, but was then abandoned, and the impression became general that the outlaws could not be killed or captured.

About this time all was quiet and peaceful on the Fouts ranch. Mark had so far recovered from his wound as to help himself considerably, but he was still unable to handle a gun.

One morning he came into the house suddenly after having been out a few minutes, and

announced excitedly that Dick Belmont and Matt Simmerman had just left the place, taking with them two of the best horses on the ranch.

"Are you sure of your men?" asked Charlie Fouts, as he prepared to follow them.

"Yes, sure," answered Mark. "I saw them as they rode away."

The ranchman started in pursuit at once. Mark remained at home, being still too feeble to endure much exercise.

For seven days Fouts followed the trail of the murderers; then he discovered them in a dug-out, where they had stopped for the night.

Early the next morning Belmont came out of the place to look for his horse, which had wandered off a few rods during the night.

Fouts, laying in wait for him, ordered him to surrender.

Instantly the desperado reached for his revolver, but before he could use it a ball from the Remington rifle of the young ranchman pierced his heart and he fell to the ground, a corpse.

Then Simmerman made his appearance, but the sharp command to "surrender" had its effect, and he gave himself up without a word.

A week later Charlie Fouts, the heroic

young plainsman, stood in the presence of the Governor of Nebraska and received the reward which had been placed on the head of the outlaw Belmont. The body of the desperado had been brought to the capital of the State, where, after having been identified in the regular way it was buried.

Matt Simmerman, Dick Belmont's companion in crime, was taken to Minden, where he was tried for murder, found guilty, and sentenced to death.

Charlie Fouts returned home and told Mark all that had happened.

"Thank Heaven! the tribe is extinct," exclaimed the boy fervently. "The death of my beloved parents is now avenged."

Mark continued to improve rapidly, and was soon as well as ever. He is still on the plains and is rapidly acquiring a cunning, skill and bravery in hunting down desperadoes and criminals generally that will in time place him in the front rank of frontier detectives.

As for the other characters introduced in this story—Sheriff Jones and daughter Sally, and the aged negro, George Washington Horn, all are living—quietly, and contentedly.

THE END.

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